

“WORSHIPERS OF FELINITY”:
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION VIA THE DOMESTIC CAT

by

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Abstract

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“Worshippers of Felinity”: Identity Construction via the Domestic Cat

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While research about human-nonhuman relationships benefits humans insofar as it provides parallels for understanding ourselves, sociological scholarship can also benefit other species by revealing their significance to human sociality. Researchers have used social psychological theories of interaction to successfully describe the ways that nonhumans serve as generalized others, co-produce symbolic meaning, and accomplish relational goals. These scholars have also illustrated how humans construct identities for their nonhuman companions. Fewer studies have undertaken how other animals are utilized in human identity construction, and as of this writing, no research has specifically examined identity work among those who consider domestic cats significant to their self-construction processes. This is a significant oversight, given that over one-quarter of American homes contain a cat, as well as cats’ roles in culture as instruments of self-expression. Moreover, cats exist in a state of perpetual cultural flux, simultaneously beloved and reviled—a status that has real consequences for their lives and well-being. However, it is clear that cats serve for many people as important identity markers in the same ways as friends, families, and other significant relationships. Motivated by the ultimate goal of uplifting the social status of the species, my research advances this mandate by investigating the phenomenon of performing identity work with cats. Broadly using a symbolic interaction lens, this dissertation examines how four different groups of individuals who are associated with domestic cats perform identity work that positions cats as critical social actors in their self-concepts.

Situating my questions within social psychological theories of identity and a multidisciplinary body of research describing human-nonhuman relationships, I interviewed 69 people across four groups of individuals: men who share pictures and information about their cats on social media; feline-exclusive veterinarians; cat fanciers—those who breed and show cats; and those who provide care for unhomed cats. These interviews informed the research question, “How do members of different social groups outwardly identifying as having an interest in domestic cats use the same species to construct their personal and social identities?” Two associated questions guided my constructivist grounded theory analysis: (1) What are the similarities and differences in identity work between these groups, and why do they occur? and (2) How does identity work translate into resisting or reinforcing boundaries with, and social construction of, domestic cats? I positioned my findings within a three-phase framework of human-nonhuman relationships—embodied experiences, attunement, and identity transformation—to describe one personal identity transformation and one social identity transformation for each group.

All interviewees discussed the ways they simultaneously reinforce and resist social boundaries between humans and cats to varying degrees. The identity work that my participants perform furthermore contests social stigma related to cats and those who care for them in their roles as, alternately, parental figures, advocates, and caretakers. Through “being-with” cats—engaging them in intentional relationships of mutual subjectivity—as well as “being-for” cats—acting in ways that further their individual interests—my interviewees also challenge stereotypes related to gender, family, hierarchy, and labor. Simultaneously, those who live with and/or care for cats constrict their agency through making decisions on their behalf regarding reproduction, diet, and other limits on their *telos*, the inexorable qualities associated with felinity. While doing

so is an inevitable outcome of domestication, each group demonstrated accommodating cats' preferences to varying degrees. Highlighting individuals' whose identities are partially constructed via interaction with cats demonstrates how the boundaries between humans and cats are negotiated. Looking to my participants' insights on how they view the cats in their care as agentic individuals can help to erase harmful stereotypes about the species and elevate the domestic cat's status as a subjective actor, a critical step to more humane and inclusive policies that defy traditional conceptions of nonhumans as objects.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation examines the role of domestic cats in the construction of human identity. It focuses on four groups of people who include cats as part of their individual and social selves: men who share their human-cat relationships on social media; feline-exclusive veterinarians; cat fanciers, or breeders/hobbyists; and community cat caretakers. Situating this research within social psychological theories of identity and a multidisciplinary body of research describing human-nonhuman relationships, I examine the identity work undertaken in each case and ask, “How do members of different social groups outwardly identifying as having an interest in domestic cats use the same species to construct their personal and social identities?” Two related questions positioned in the symbolic interaction framework inform data analysis: (1) What are the similarities and differences in identity work between these groups, and why do they occur? and (2) How does identity work translate into resisting or reinforcing boundaries with, and social construction of, domestic cats?

The paucity of research that examines the influence of cats on human identity reflects enduring cultural ambivalence toward animals in general. This ambivalence, combined with ever-changing attitudes toward nonhumans, has led Arluke and Sanders (2009:xviii) to describe two existing schools of thought: “...the definition and treatment of animals as functional objects, on the one hand, and sentient individuals, on the other.” Vacillation between these statuses works to the advantage of humans, who inconsistently situate other animals somewhere between object and individual, viewing, for example, some species as food and others as cherished family members. Furthermore, attitudes toward nonhumans are decidedly fluid, varying in response to cultural values, beliefs, and institutional pressures. At one extreme, species occupy a space firmly defined as outside human compassion and consideration; at the other, species inhabit a

privileged place of significance and appreciation. Other nonhumans—depending on factors such as where they live, their use value, cultural framing, and the burdens they create for humans—reside amid uncertainty and conflicted societal esteem.

The domestic cat—*Felis catus*—is one such animal, existing in a culturally liminal space between domestication and relative self-sufficiency. Though often situated within the human home, cats exhibit a mystique that purportedly renders them less accessible—and therefore less understood—than dogs. Even as cats are the second most numerous companion animal in the United States (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA] 2024), their comparatively recent entry into human spaces, their ability to survive without human intervention, and their innate behaviors coalesce to render them in the cultural imagination as astride the border between wild and tame. Simultaneously, negative stereotypes abound of cats as uninterested in human companionship and interaction. They are construed as the paragon of indifference, devoid of empathy and fiercely independent. These constructions, rooted in Middle Age associations of cats with paganism, witchcraft, and femininity (Rogers 1998; 2006), have endured in popular notions of cats, even among some who call them companions. Rebuffing these pre-conceptions is difficult, as most cats do not accompany their humans on walks or to designated public spaces; therefore, most interaction between cats and their guardians remains invisible (Tucker 2016).

Domestic cats have long served as exemplars of the construction and maintenance of both physical and symbolic boundaries between humans and other animals (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Given their relative independence, until approximately the 1940s, cats largely remained outside the domestic space, constituting a physical boundary between felines and humans. Cats could demonstrably survive without human involvement, exhibiting self-sufficiency in acquiring sustenance, seeking shelter, reproducing, and finding safety from predators. Despite a large

number of cats being taken into human homes subsequent to the invention of cat litter (Maggitti 1996) and widespread availability of affordable protein (Crowley, Cecchetti, and McDonald 2020), a symbolic boundary between the two species remains. Boundaries between humans and other animals are clear in many ways: in language that divides them and grants humans favor; legal definitions that classify nonhumans as property; and ethical systems that grant humans natural rights but fail to consider moral obligations to other species. Hobson-West (2007:25) refers to nonhumans as the “ultimate ‘other’”—an apt description of beings with whom we co-exist, but can never fully access in the same ways we can at least attempt with other humans. Nowhere in the companion animal realm is this more evident than in relationships with domestic cats, a species that straddles the line between nature and domesticity. The symbolic boundaries surrounding domestic cats facilitate negative cultural stereotypes of the species; inappropriate care; neglect and abuse; and assignation of a status closer to object than to subject.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In making the case for sociological study of human-nonhuman relationships, it is imperative to question whom this work benefits. Clearly, scholarship on human-nonhuman relationships benefits humans inasmuch as it helps us to understand ourselves. We can examine the consequences, for example, when politicians—who, with the advent of the internet and the 24/7 news cycle, are more visible than ever before—use animalizing discourse against social justice activists and immigrants. However, sociological scholarship can also benefit other species—in the present study, one that is disproportionately a target of derision—by illuminating the value of granting them subjectivity. This research aims, first and foremost, to contribute to better quality of life for domestic cats as a species whose wellbeing is inexorably linked to human society and intervention. Demonstrating the impact of cats on development of the human

self can reveal their roles as significant social actors, inviting them into the human realm of meaning-making. As Atwood-Harvey (2005) points out in her study of feline declawing, distancing ourselves from other animals allows us to harm them more readily. Such a claim is instructive when we consider threats to animal well-being such as overpopulation and cruelty, the lax consequences of which are linked to construction of nonhumans as objects.

Alternatively, research about nonhuman subjectivity can, Arluke (2003) contends, illuminate debates about how society uses animals, utilizing a discourse that is neither emotional nor self-serving. Only in giving serious consideration to the nonhuman subject can we fully engage with the possibilities of righting wrongs that humans have long perpetrated. My research advances this critical mandate by investigating how people perform identity work with domestic cats, a species in perpetual cultural flux, but one that serves for many people as an important identity marker in the same ways as friends, families, and other significant relationships. I argue that those who engage in this identity work resist prevailing cultural narratives about cats, contesting symbolic boundaries, enacting resistance, and creating “narratives of connection” (Čapek 2006:168) to challenge “narratives of separation” (Čapek 2006:165). Studying these processes will add to knowledge about how interaction with other species contributes to understanding of the self, but just as importantly, will establish the value of traversing boundaries that have long subjugated the domestic cat to secondary status.

RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Natural and social scientists who study nonhuman animal behavior regularly face accusations of anthropomorphism. Those who level these charges aim to maintain boundaries between humans and other species through discrediting claims and evidence demonstrating nonhumans’ abilities to engage in meaningful, purposive action. However, anthropomorphism

per se is not necessarily harmful; indeed, it is inevitable, given that the human viewpoint is the only one we have access to (Irvine 2008b). Drawing a distinction between different forms of anthropomorphism is a useful exercise to understand the potential harms and benefits of engaging in this practice. Irvine (2008b:73) contends that “sentimental” anthropomorphism—in which humans unreflectively project emotion and desires onto other animals—can create unrealistic expectations and “short-circuits the effort to understand animals’ realities in animals’ terms.” In other words, sentimental anthropomorphism largely serves human egos and draws solely from their experiences, discounting the lived realities of other embodied beings. Equating humans and nonhumans as fully congruent does a disservice to the unique characteristics defining each.

However, so does placing humans and other species on opposite ends of the object-subject spectrum. Attempting to disengage in anthropomorphism to such an extent can result in what de Waal (1999) refers to as “anthropodenial,” an equally harmful proposition that refutes the importance of nonhuman actors in society, both in general and in the roles they fulfill as persons. Engaging in *critical* anthropomorphism (Irvine 2008b) means accounting for animals’ behavioral repertoires, individual histories, and interactional cues when making inferences about their affect and intentions. Just as we are able to deduce other humans’ states of being and interactional goals based on these factors, so too can we make honest attempts to engage with other animals. In doing so, we can better attend to their individual needs, preferences, and personalities. Anthropodenial has long been the position of sociology as a discipline. However, scholars of animals and society—building upon social psychological theories of interaction and engaging in critical anthropomorphism—have successfully demonstrated the significant roles that nonhumans play in human social life (Alger and Alger 1997; Billany 2014; Irvine 2004;

Irvine and Cilia 2017; Laurent-Simpson 2021; Sanders 2003; Schally and Couch 2013). They have described the ways that nonhumans act as generalized others, produce symbolic meaning in concert with humans, and undertake actions to fulfill relational goals. These scholars have also described identity co-construction between humans and other animals, chiefly through examining how humans impart identities onto nonhuman companions (Austin and Irvine 2020; Phillips 1994; Sanders 1993; Taylor 2007).

Fewer studies have sought to understand the parallel process that considers other animals as a basis for identity construction, though given their tendency to accompany humans outside the home, some studies have examined identity work through dogs (Furst 2007; Ramirez 2006). To my knowledge, no study to date has specifically examined identity processes among those who consider cats significant social actors in their self-construction. This research undertakes this task, long overdue given the domestic cat's popularity as a companion animal; cultural cachet as a vehicle for self-expression; and status as a simultaneously prized and devalued creature. Moreover, this research sheds light on topics beyond the realm of human-nonhuman relationships, such as how both personal and social identity constitute significant conduits for understanding emotion and consequent action (Deaux 2015), as well as connecting individuals to the social institutions and structures in which they enact their identities (Stets and Biga 2003). Highlighting those whose identities compel them to defy the boundaries between humans and cats can help to erase harmful stereotypes about the species and elevate the domestic cat to the status of subjective actor. This is a critical step to more humane and inclusive policies and a move away from the nonhuman-as-object paradigm.

Additionally, scholarship addressing the significant roles that companion animals embody can empower those who enact critical social support programs. For example, Irvine (2013:171)

posits that “Research on pet policies addresses issues that have disproportionate impact on the poor.” Irvine draws this conclusion from her extensive research on individuals experiencing homelessness, whose companion animals provide a sense of purpose and mattering that the person may not have access to otherwise. In times of disaster resulting in the need for household evacuation, leaving a companion animal behind is a significant predictor of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hunt, Al-Awadi, and Johnson 2008; Lowe et al. 2009), pointing to the importance of these family members in maintaining a sense of normalcy and well-being in stressful situations. Social programs that account for keeping companion animals secure and healthy provide a safety net not only for the nonhuman, but the person as well. Research that verifies the roles animals play in construction of the self supports the efforts of policymakers and advocates by allowing them to better design interventions for vulnerable individuals whose companion animals are significant sources of identity.

Lastly, speciesism—the belief in human superiority over other animals—is linked to other forms of oppression (Irvine 2008a). Largely embedded in economic structures and resultant power struggles, and reinforced by ideological discourse (Nibert 2003), speciesism’s parallels with racism, sexism, and other entrenched systems of domination point to similar underlying mechanisms for how subjugation is enacted. As domestic cats are constructed as “the other” in sometimes very harmful ways, social identity theory predicts that those who associate with them will experience social sanctioning. Therefore, understanding the work that the “cat person” does to protect their identity will provide important information about how they resist stigma—not only for themselves, and for cats, but for similarly situated others. Furthermore, I anticipate that, accounting for other facets of identity, my participants experience varying levels of stigma and incorporate it into their senses of self differently. Exploring these differences holds implications

for intersections of identity—potentially to include gender, race, and class, among others—with the cat person identity.

Over a half century ago, Becker (1967) posed the question of whose side sociological researchers are on. In studying identity construction with domestic cats, I firmly place myself on the side of both human *and* nonhuman. Socially constructed boundaries are difficult to deconstruct, but they can become more permeable, much to the domestic cat's benefit, but to humans' benefit, as well. As Sanders and Arluke (1993:386) contend,

The ultimate utility of the intimate, emotionally aware, introspective, intervention-directed, appreciative study of animals and their relationships with humans is the promise this endeavor offers of countering the masculinist, positivist, structuralist, reductionist view of the natural world and the place of 'man' within that world.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

As detailed in Chapter 3, I examined identity work through in-depth, active interviews, which were conducted over Zoom or Google Meet. I recorded, with participant consent, all interviews except one where the participant and I experienced technical difficulties. After each interview, I used a computer-aided service to transcribe the interview verbatim. I then listened to the interview again while reading through the transcript and made corrections based on the recording. This served not only to ensure accuracy, but also as a first-pass reacquaintance with the data. Throughout the interview process, I analyzed the data iteratively, informing further interviews and evaluating saturation of themes. All participants were offered a \$15 Amazon.com gift card as a small token of appreciation for their time and effort. I interviewed 21 men, 20 feline veterinarians, 16 fanciers, and 12 community cat caretakers for a total of 69 interviews.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees were white, corresponding with General Social Survey data indicating that white Americans are significantly more likely to live with a cat than African Americans, those who identify as Latinx, and those who identify as another race (Applebaum, Peek, and Zsembik 2020).

Data analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach, with overarching codes assigned on the first pass and further code refinement occurring as data collection progressed. Though traditional grounded theory analysis as conceived of by Glaser and Strauss (1967) eschews existing theoretical knowledge, refiners of the method recognize that no researcher can be expected to fully discount their previous knowledge and theoretical expertise (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss emphasize strict researcher objectivity; in contrast, constructivist grounded theory stresses that the researcher partners with participants in knowledge creation (Charmaz 2000). In accordance with Irvine's (2012) proposal that lending a symbolic interaction lens to anthrozoological research can provide more clarity about the lived realities of those who interact with nonhumans, my analysis was broadly situated in the symbolic interaction framework. I used the guiding questions above along with inductive techniques to identify common themes, developing and refining codes and sub-codes to describe identity work within and across study populations. I identified and described themes within each individual identity, as well as across all identity categories to develop a cohesive theory of identity work using domestic cats as significant interactants.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Consistent with my aim of highlighting cats as subjects, not objects, I use the word "guardian" throughout this dissertation to encompass people who care for cats living in their homes or surrounding domestic spaces (Carlisle-Frank and Frank 2006). Additionally, guardians

think of the cats as “theirs”—that is, they have a rightful claim to the cat. As such, the word “owner” would be more accurate in a legal sense, as companion animals are classified as property, just as a car or piece of clothing. However, I prefer to use the word “guardian” to avoid negative connotations of possession and objectification of a living being. In accordance with terminology used by Alley Cat Allies (2024a), the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) (2024a), and Best Friends Animal Society (2023), I use the term “community cats” to describe cats who live outdoors. Furthermore, I use the terms “caretaker” or “rescuer” interchangeably to describe those who engage in caretaking activities for these cats. Finally, though I affirm that humans are indeed animals and generally prefer the terms “nonhuman” or “nonhuman animal,” I occasionally use the word “animal” in concession to space and flow.

ORGANIZATION

The following discussion is organized into seven chapters. The first is a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding nonhumans and society; domestic cats; identity theory; identity work, including that performed with nonhumans and that performed by each of my four groups under study; and intersubjectivity with nonhumans. The next chapter details the methodology I used to perform this study, including overviews of qualitative epistemology; sampling and recruitment strategies; ethical protections; data collection, analysis, and presentation; and my analytical framework. I conclude the chapter with reflections on my positionality as a researcher and as an anthrozoologist. Next, I present my results, with one chapter devoted to each studied group, encompassing both findings and discussion. I close with a chapter discussing my conclusions in relation to my research question and aims; contributions to the field of sociology—specifically, the animals and society and social psychology subfields;

links to existing theory and practice; the study's limitations; and recommendations for future research extending my findings.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

I situate this research at the intersection of two bodies of literature: one focused on the sociological significance of human interaction with other animals, and the other delving into the social psychological processes associated with the formation of identity. In this chapter, I first examine these bodies of work separately. I then explore how they overlap in each of the four focal groups of this study. In doing so, I set the stage for the empirical analysis in the chapters that follow.

ANIMALS AND SOCIETY

Sociology's focus on human societies has long been used as justification for erasing discourse about the various nonhuman others with whom we share our world. Peggs (2013:593) challenges the field to rethink this stance: "Non-human animals are central to societies and thus are of sociological relevance even in terms of a constrained sociology that centers solely on humans." Indeed, animals are critical actors in society in countless ways, such that discounting their influence borders on irresponsibility. Animals' prominent roles in the sociologies of food, environment, sport, and family are fairly evident domains for study of the nonhuman. However, some less obvious spaces appear throughout the field upon further reflection. Consider, for example, the animal as laborer, economic commodity, or symbolic resource, or the roles nonhumans serve in health, education, and media.

One of the most prominent roles animals play in human society is as living beings through whom we can understand ourselves and other people. Certainly, they provide rich metaphors: the friend who can be described as a "busy bee" or the politician whose elusive ways draw comparison to a snake. On a larger scale, animals can be used to dehumanize entire groups, such as when Jewish people were compared to rodents or insects during World War 2 as

justification for their eradication. Animals serve as useful foils to think about humans, as they are simultaneously similar to and different from us, providing both recognizable reference points and boundaries by which we can measure our humanity. Arluke and Sanders (1996:169) thus devised the sociozoologic scale, a continuum allowing humans to “Rank them [other animals] according to how well they seem to ‘fit in’ and play the roles they are expected to play in society.” On the “good” end are nonhumans who serve a useful function to meet either material or emotional needs for humans; for example, cows (food) and dogs (companionship) reside on this side of the scale. On the “bad” end are nonhumans who pose problems to humans: the creatures we consider vermin or dangerous to our well-being. Unsurprisingly, a nonhuman’s place on the sociozoologic scale is highly dependent on time, place, and context. For example, the rat could be considered “good” when it serves as the subject of pharmaceutical testing and “bad” when it enters one’s kitchen seeking food; the wolf is considered a symbol of freedom and power until it kills a farmer’s cattle, at which time it is recast as a nuisance.

This negotiation of nonhumans in the cultural imagination is constant. For example, Lloro and Hunold (2020) describe a situation of nonhumans earning scorn for being out of place within two separate communities, each with its own instrumental concerns. The authors described how, in urban and rural settings alike, Facebook users expressed concern about the safety threats posed by coyotes, the former with respect to companion animals and the latter in regard to livestock. Politics and debate over ethical responsibilities may also dictate classification of nonhumans. Čapek (2006) documented a range of reactions to an incident in Arkansas in which a residential construction company bulldozed a colony of nesting cattle egrets, killing or injuring nearly 5,000 birds. Some local residents saw the birds as necessary casualties in the service of economic development, while others viewed the egrets as victims of

capitalist greed. Raccoons inhabiting the area surrounding a university childcare complex in British Columbia served as an example of a conflicted species in work done by Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2015). While both the children and the educators in the space regarded the animals as charming and captivating, the adults additionally carried a sense of fear for the children's safety. Given raccoons' intelligence and curiosity, along with their behaviors that are in some ways strikingly similar to humans', they "as boundary crossers...are constituted as unruly subjects because of their refusal to maintain the human/nonhuman divide" (p. 153).

The Human-Nonhuman Boundary

The concept of boundaries—the symbolic lines drawn to delineate oneself from others—is fundamental to many areas of sociological study, including race, gender, politics, and religion, among others. Modern sociological scholarship on boundaries has been pioneered by Michèle Lamont, who, along with Virág Molnár (2002:168), described symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space." These divisions, the authors explain, are essential to symbolic interaction in that they aid in the organization of and agreement upon social reality. For example, symbolic boundaries can generate feelings of group affiliation. However, this can be to the detriment of groups deemed outside the majority in terms of access to resources, both material and symbolic. At this point, the boundary is no longer symbolic but social, denoting consequences such as exclusion or acts of violence. Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont (2007) introduce boundaries into the individual realm as well, suggesting that examination of how boundaries are produced and received can highlight important personal identity processes. For instance, symbolic boundaries have consequences for those whose identities are denigrated, and the ways in which individuals embrace or reject available "cultural repertoires, traditions, and narratives" (Lamont

and Molnár 2002:171) illuminate how boundaries shape individual identity. Boundaries are thus deeply culturally relative and can become embedded in cultural identities, practices, and hierarchies, arising as an intertwined system of both symbolic and social boundaries that bridge the micro and macro levels of society (Lamont 2002; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Attempts to firmly demarcate the boundary between human and nonhuman appear in writings dating to antiquity and continue to the present time, as evidenced by ever-shifting goalposts by which we measure animals' worthiness of care and consideration.

Companion animals occupy an interesting space on the human/nonhuman boundary as they are often imbued with traits that situate them as comparable to human social connections, but they are clearly not human (Fox 2006). Yet because companion animals live in human homes—and many consider them family members (e.g., Irvine and Cilia 2017; Laurent-Simpson 2021; Power 2008; Tovares 2010)—their “otherness” often becomes an endearing trait or a curiosity to explore. However, not all domesticated animals are so fortunate; as Greenebaum (2010:140) points out, “If they are treated as tools, possessions, or objects, then they can be easily disposed of when they do not live up to our expectations.” This is evident when considering the hundreds of thousands of healthy domestic cats who are euthanized each year simply because they lack homes.

The Domestic Cat

In terms of the human/nonhuman boundary, there is no better example of a companion animal existing in a liminal space than the domestic cat. Tens of millions of cats live inside homes with people who treat them as cherished friends or family members (AVMA 2022). However, some individuals view cats as devious, unsympathetic creatures and treat them with indifference, at best, or even outright vilification. This attitude can be traced to medieval

Christian efforts to obliterate the significance of cats in ancient polytheistic religious traditions. The proliferation of Christianity in Europe in the late Middle Ages saw cats go from revered symbols of femininity and motherhood to—due to association with powerful women and, moreover, pagan goddesses—characterization of cats as the embodiment of Satan (Engels 1999; Serpell 2013). During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods in Europe, cats slowly gained favor as human companions, first among the aristocratic class, then in society as a whole. Engels (1999:172) points out the irony of cats being acquired as a force for cleanliness, given that their eradication likely accelerated spread of the Black Death due to insufficient rat control:

It is also of interest that Louis Pasteur admired the cat and held up its habits of cleanliness as an example for humanity to emulate if they wished to avoid getting sick. When, at last, the Europeans learned that dirt was bad and cleanliness was good, not vice versa, the cat began to resume its rightful place as guardian and protector of the house against vermin and misfortune.

Concurrently, cultural interest in the cat blossomed in East Asia. Japanese artists and writers, in particular, took advantage of the public's demand for stories of the supernatural, and the *bakeneko*—a shapeshifting cat—captured people's imagination, as did other folkloric cats, both benevolent and wicked (Davisson 2020).

However, this shift in attitudes toward cats was far from universal. In Ritvo's (1985:85) review of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century zoological literature aimed toward children, cats were characterized as "faithless, deceitful, destructive, and cruel," and much animosity was directed at the cat's resistance to human attempts at dominance. In addition, cats' links to women remained, an association that remains steadfast to the present (Mitchell and Ellis 2013; Ramirez 2006). The folk character of the "crazy cat lady," for instance, is related to concepts of "women

as witches with their ‘familiar,’ unhinged from human society, living at odds with the rest of the community...her love of cats is fundamentally misanthropic” (Probyn-Rapsey 2019:176-177). In addition to cynicism toward fellow humans, the crazy cat lady rebels against traditional ideals related to femininity, marriage, and family (Davis 2016). Like cats, they defy attempts at control while straddling an uncomfortable border that resists categorization.

Indeed, Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley (2000:62) label cats as “Those animals which transgress the boundary between civilisation and nature, or between public and private, which do not stay in their allotted space,” earning them a reputation as “transgressive.” Their ability to survive outdoors without human intervention leads to notions of cats as not fully domesticated (Lyons and Kurushima 2012); in other words, “part culture, part nature” (Serpell 2013:98). Cats’ place in the natural world is perennially contested by those who view community cats as disease-ridden and invasive, and their encroachment on human spaces contemptuous. Some conservation biologists, for example, attribute widespread ecosystem loss and destruction to cats who live or spend time outdoors (Loss and Marra 2017; Marra and Santella 2016) and call for control of outdoor cats to include extermination. *Felis catus* is not native to North America, lending some discussions of the community cat issue a distinctly xenophobic tone, as in Barrows’ (2004:1365) characterization of cats as “alien predators.” Others simply dislike cats roaming through their neighborhoods and preying on wildlife, particularly birds. This phenomenon pits the value of one species against another with support from major organizations such as the National Audubon Society, whose language depicts cats’ predation as “violence” rather than a necessity for survival (Cudmore 2015).

Simultaneously, cats play more secure, affective, and relational roles in the family and popular culture. Those who live with cats describe them as significant sources of social support

analogous to friends and family members (Austin and Irvine 2020). They induce comfort and a sense of stability in their guardians (Currin-McCulloch et al. 2021), and internet users seek images of cats to buoy their spirits in times of personal and societal turmoil (Maddox 2023). Cats are the second most popular companion animal in the United States (AVMA 2022), and most cat guardians refer to their feline companions in terms of human relationships (Bouma, Reijgwart, and Dijkstra 2021). Petabytes of server space are dedicated to hosting photos and videos of cats as one of the most popular subjects of shared internet content. As Tucker (2016) posits, in the absence of public spaces to share relationships with cats, the internet fills the void as an ersatz “dog park” where cat enthusiasts can connect with others who share their admiration of the species. Furthermore, referring to cats’ comparatively inscrutable facial expressions, Tucker explains (2016:178), “Cat faces are blanks that human beings, as hypersocial beings, feel compelled to fill in.” Therefore, cats frequently appear in image macros, photos with text captions added to express an aspect of personal experience or emotion, either on the human’s or the cat’s behalf.

Cultural vacillation between cats as relatable, loveable companions on one hand, and nuisances or outright threats to human well-being and the larger ecosystem on the other, has real consequences for their lives and interests. Even homed cats are less likely than dogs to be viewed as friends or family (AVMA 2018), a distancing that Atwood-Harvey (2005) contends allows people to more readily harm nonhumans for our own means. For example, declawing—a procedure that inflicts pain; induces psychological trauma; and interferes with scratching, an innate and critical behavior among domestic cats—is performed by over 70 percent of veterinarians in the United States (Ruch-Gallie et al. 2016). Google searches reveal thousands of anecdotes and news stories regarding cats being abandoned when their guardians relocate (e.g.,

Chorney 2018; Collins 2024). Additionally, veterinary care recommendations are less adhered to among cat guardians than dog guardians (AVMA 2018), despite ongoing efforts to ensure cats are receiving routine visits. This more detached stance; misunderstanding of feline behavior informed by cultural stereotypes; and human irresponsibility surrounding overpopulation coalesce to result in over a half-million cats being euthanized in shelters each year (ASPCA 2024b).

Still, for many of those who live or work with cats, their companionship is socially significant and leads to interactions similar in both degree and kind to human-human relationships. For example, Alger and Alger (1997) found that cat guardians imbue their companions with individuality, granting them agency, the ability to anticipate a future, problem-solving capacities, and the aptitude to make choices. In an autoethnographic reflection, Young (2013) describes his experiences of intersubjectivity with his cat, Rocky. He explains the underlying supposition inherent to this project, invoking the ideas of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934): “The accomplishment of intersubjectivity begins with the assumption of its possibility, and that assumption gives meaning and focus to interaction” (Young 2013:300). These constructions of the cat allow those who live with them to assign them personhood and identity in many of the same ways humans fashion their own.

IDENTITY

This analysis also draws on the social psychological literature on identity construction and negotiation. To define the concept of identity and how I use it here, it will help to first distinguish it from the related concept of the self. Owens and Samblanet (2013:226) define the self as “an organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities, and motives that (1) is born of self-reflexivity and language, (2) people attribute to themselves, and (3) characterizes

specific human beings.” Reflexivity is an especially relevant component of self-construction in sociological social psychology, in that it requires individuals to incorporate information about their selves through the lens of others: “Society influences the self through its shared language and meanings that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect on oneself as an object” (McCall and Simmons 1978; Mead 1934; Stets and Burke 2003:128). Thus, a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between self and society (Stryker 1980) such that self is an ongoing negotiation developed as individuals see themselves as an object reflected in others’ appraisals (Rosenberg 1979; Stets and Burke 2003).

Identities, on the other hand, can be thought of as components of the self (Stets and Burke 2003). Stets and Serpe (2013:31) explain, “We consider an identity to be a shared set of meanings that define individuals in particular roles in society...as members of specific groups in society...and as persons having specific characteristics that make them unique from others.” For example, a person may hold identities as a doctor (role), a participant in a gardening club (group member), and a bookworm (personal characteristic). Each identity, Burke (1980) contends, is also inversely related to another; that is, its formation and presentation emerge partially as an attempt to define what the individual is *not*.

Because identities are situated and constructed, shared meanings are enormously significant to their formation: Lamont (2002) points out that identities are limited by cultural definitions and structural frameworks. However, Burke and Stets (2023a:166) clarify that though this is true, “person identities” emerge as uniquely meaningful to each individual. Hitlin (2003:121) wrote that personal identity resides at the “core of the self, experienced as unique but subject to social patterning through the concept of values.” McCall and Simmons (1978)

additionally point out that though role identities entail a large degree of conformity, there is sufficient latitude for individuals to enact identities in their own unique ways.

Still, individuals look to others to validate their social identities, or those displayed through interaction: “Identity verification is individuals perceiving that others see them in a situation in the same way they see themselves” (Stets and Serpe 2013:35). Others impart their impressions of individuals’ identities through words and actions that either confirm or challenge the person’s self-concept. For example, if somebody who identifies as an animal person receives criticism from a friend for eating chicken, the animal person identity is called into question. On the other hand, if the animal person receives praise for how happy their dog seems, the identity is affirmed. Identity verification is a critical component of self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002), as positive emotion arises when others verify an individual’s identity. Conversely, when identities are contested, negative emotion results (Burke and Stets 1999). When identities are challenged, individuals perform identity work to repair inconsistencies between their own perceptions of self and those of others.

Identity Work

Snow and Anderson (1987), in conceptualizing identity work, build on the proposition that identity construction is a means of positioning others as social objects to guide further interaction. This entails not only interpreting the social identities of others, but projection of one’s own desired identity and engaging in impression management (Goffman 1959). These undertakings are part of the larger concept of identity work, which Snow and Anderson (1987:1348) define as “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.” Identity work may take various forms, including manipulation of one’s surrounding environment or the objects

within; physical presentation and appearance; cultivation of one's personal interactants and social groups; and verbal and other expressive cues meant to signal a given identity (Snow and Anderson 1993).

It is upon this final form of identity work—sometimes referred to as “identity talk” (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348)—that this analysis rests, following the work of others who have examined this mechanism for identity assertion. For example, Irvine, Kahl, and Smith (2012) described how unhoused individuals engaged in verbally creating identities, redefining the tenets of responsible animal companionship to align with their own activities. Oselin (2018) spoke with male current and former sex workers to determine how they use identity talk to resist stigma, including creating redemption narratives and casting sex work as empowering. Åkerström, Burcar, and Wästerfors (2011) interviewed men who were targets of crime to investigate how they balance two simultaneous identities, presenting themselves both as masculine and as victims. Men would, for example, emphasize that they did not initiate the crime—thereby allowing them to claim their victim status—but concurrently underscore their efforts to defend themselves, meeting societal expectations of stereotypical masculine actions. Similarly to how these individuals construct and repair identities with symbolic resources—such as responsibility, empowerment, and victimhood—nonhumans, too, can be used to facilitate identity talk.

Identity Work with Animals

Animal studies scholars conceive of interaction between humans and other animals as congruent with the “natural rituals” of interaction among humans proposed by Collins (1989:17-18), encompassing “focus[ed] attention on the same object or action...common mood or emotion...shared reality...[and] moral obligations to one another.” Critical to the natural ritual is

role-taking and its attendant emotions, which Collins (1989:19) claims strengthen commitment to the ritual and result in “a recycling of emotional rhythms.” In foundational work examining these rituals between people and other animals, Sanders (1993) described how individuals create personhood, intersubjectivity, and social mind among dogs, defining them not as humans, yet still as *persons*, with whom significant interaction creates and sustains the relationship. Other work has focused on interaction with not only dogs (Furst 2007; Greenebaum 2010), but with cats (Alger and Alger 2002; Young 2013) and horses (Brandt 2004; Wipper 2000), among other species. These studies upend Mead’s (1934) idea of symbolic interaction as being grounded in spoken language (Alger and Alger 1997; Irvine 2003; Sanders 2003), instead resting on the premise that nonhumans engage in meaningful interaction through other symbols.

Such research provides a foundation for study of identity work with nonhumans, most of which centers around constructing the animal’s identity. Irvine (2004) proposed a model of selfhood for nonhumans, comprising four elements: agency, or the ability to determine one’s own actions while not determining others’; coherence, or a physical wholeness from which agency is derived and enacted; affectivity, or the capacity to feel emotions and display expressive states; and self-history, where one changes, yet remains the same in the sense of continuity of self. These four characteristics enable relationships, which in turn facilitate creation and refinement of self. A vital aspect to Irvine’s (2004:8) theory is that nonhumans differ from inanimate objects humans use to build the self, because in animals we sense a “subjective presence of the Other,” who has “a mind, desires, and beliefs, just as we do.” Using Irvine’s model, we can begin to construct a self for the animals we live with, and many do so reflexively.

Similarly, looking to how individuals construct selves for humans who are unable to communicate through conventional means—that is, through language—can illuminate similar

processes of identity creation for nonhumans. Examining the ways that people construct identities for individuals without verbal capacities is instructive in understanding parallel processes between humans and other species, as it likewise entails extrapolation through close interaction and observation. For instance, Bogdan and Taylor (1989) explored identity construction for individuals with severe mental impairment. The authors described four main ways that people constructed identities for their loved ones: attributing thought; attributing individuality; attributing reciprocity; and affording them a social space.

Sanders (1993) utilized this framework to build an understanding of how people construct identities for their dogs, concluding that dog guardians, through intimate familiarity and interactions, gain a sense of their companions' minded agency and experiences of their world. Viewing their dogs this way is foundational to producing meaningful interaction and "achiev[ing] defined goals in the course of routine social exchanges" (Sanders 1993:207), benefiting human, nonhuman, and the relationship between the two. In a study of the rabbit-focused social networking site Bunspace, DeMello (2013) contends that blogging on the site may benefit companion animals as guardians often write from their rabbit's point of view—not only showcasing them as a voice worth paying attention to, but genuinely trying to understand what they may be thinking or feeling. Schally and Couch (2013) described a similar process of cats' identity creation through guardians' observed and interpreted characteristics of their companions on Catster, a social networking site centering human-cat relationships. Identity work on behalf of animals is also carried out in rituals such as play; naming and using pronouns; assigning personality traits; giving the animal voice; and crafting their biography (Austin and Irvine 2020; Phillips 1994; Sanders 1993; Taylor 2007).

The complement to studying identity through constructing animals as intersubjective actors is the human side of this interaction: how humans' personal identities are shaped through interaction with nonhuman animals. It is clear that through construction of the nonhuman self, the human also shapes their own role identities; for example, if a person constructs a dog as her son, then she is manifestly identifying as a mother. However, animals can also serve as symbolic resources in identity performances and changes in internal self-concepts. In a historical example of impression management via nonhuman animals, Ritvo (1987) discusses showcasing expensive animals as an outward indicator of one's social class, a trend that continues today, as evidenced by soaring numbers of exotic animals in human homes. In 2003, Sanders asserted that most research on nonhuman impacts on identity investigated the positive effects of having a dog accompany their human in public spaces. Other studies have since emerged that demonstrated self-concept transformations as a result of relationships with nonhumans. For example, Furst (2007) described how participants in two prison-based dog socialization programs were, through the animals, able to construct redemption narratives and prosocial views of the self. Billany (2014), in an analysis of dissertation acknowledgements sections, described the language burgeoning academics used to recognize the roles their animal companions played in their success and personal transformation.

Being-With and Being-For Nonhumans

To understand the mechanisms underlying identity transformation via interaction with nonhumans, the concepts of "being-with" and "being-for" are illuminating. In developing a framework to apply to the identity-transforming effects of human-animal relationships, Dutton (2012:92) proposed that "Everyday encounters with animals appear fleetingly in such literature, meaningful perhaps only as inspirational anecdotes to fuel more rigorous methodological

approaches.” These routine interactions, Dutton contends, underlie interspecies understanding, serving as a connection to more meaningful engagement with other animals’ realities (see also Acampora 2006). To characterize these interactions, Dutton relies on a Heideggerian understanding of the term “being-with,” or the co-shaping of self in relation to others. Moran (2021:112) explained: “For Heidegger, there is no isolated ego...human existence is a priori oriented to others. As he puts it, being-with...is co-original with ‘being-oneself’ or ‘being a self.’” Thus, through her concept of being-with other species, Dutton implies that the selves of the beings involved in close, intimate interaction are transformed. Moreover, Wemelsfelder (2012) clarifies that such interactions depend on recognition of the subjectivity of the other, and to yet recognize that we cannot know another completely, as to do so is to dismiss their unique perspectives and forestall true mutual exchange. Everyday interaction proceeds toward attunement, at which point, Smuts (2001:304) contends, speaking of her dog: “Every vocalization by her or me that the other understands, every subtle movement that the other tunes into, every ritual we enact together, simultaneously reveals a mutual past and an ongoing commitment to a common future.”

Some scholars discuss the complementary concept of “being-for” the other in the human-nonhuman relationship, invoking morally-driven responsibilities and emotional labor implied by the natural ritual. Cloke and Jones (2003:199) describe the difference between being-with and being-for:

A repersonalization of morality allows the choice to be positively for the other, rather than just with the other. ‘With’ suggests an ontological separation with the other than has to be bridged over; ‘for’ suggests a morality which inhabits its own space existing independent of ontological laws.

In practical terms, being-for entails acting on the other's behalf with emotional investment and genuine moral concern. Power (2008), for example, described her participants' genuine attention to their dogs' needs and preferences as normalized parts of family activities as "being-for." While the distinction drawn by Cloke and Jones is relevant in nature, the authors use these concepts to describe humans' relationships with trees. For humans who pursue meaningful interactions with other sentient beings, it is likely that being-for and being-with are fairly inseparable, at least in the realm of companionship. In these relationships, the human's dedication to both aspects of the relationship results in identity transformation as they simultaneously reproduce and resist notions of the nonhuman as "the other."

IDENTITY WORK WITH CATS IN FOUR FOCAL GROUPS

In my findings chapters, I describe the identity changes evinced through interaction with domestic cats for four groups outwardly demonstrating affiliation with the species: men who display their human-cat relationships on social media; feline-exclusive veterinarians; cat fanciers, or hobbyists; and community cat caretakers. In the following exploration of previous work, I summarize the identity-related literature relevant to each group, laying the foundation for my analysis and discussion.

Men

Much previous research surrounding men's identity work with animals has focused on affirming hegemonic masculinity through their identity performances, mostly with dogs. Ramirez (2006:384) found that men believed they understood male dogs better, and viewed themselves as their dog's "master, friend, or playmate" rather than the parental role that women tended to assign themselves. In a study of male hip-hop artists' performativity via the pit bull terrier, Alonso-Recarte (2020:854) concluded that the dogs' "connections with bloodshed,

gambling, and drug trafficking further emphasize the criminal street credibility of the rapper that seeks to authenticate his masculinity.” Similarly, working class men who participate in dogfighting prioritize the activity in their self-hierarchy due to fewer resources from which to draw masculine status (Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998).

Cats, on the other hand, have long been associated with womanhood and femininity, dating back to ancient belief systems. Though symbols depicting women in the company of cats date back as far as the Neolithic era, the most recognizable association of domestic cats with women hearkens to ancient Egyptian deities. Sekhmet and Bastet—the goddesses and daughters of Re, the Egyptian sun god—were often imagined as human-cat hybrids, symbolizing both the fierce, resilient nature of cats and their tender, nurturing side, respectively (Rogers 1998). The Greek goddess Artemis and her Roman equivalent Diana were believed to have the ability to shapeshift into cats, particularly in service to hunting in the dark, and the Norse goddess Freya was referred to as Mistress of Cats (Diesel 2008). Among their many powers, cats were believed to serve as arbitrators between the spiritual and physical realms. In the Middle Ages, this association with polytheistic and pagan religions—along with their appearance, namely their glowing eyes, graceful stride, and heightened senses—earned domestic cats scorn as they became associated with the occult, especially as witches’ familiars (Rogers 1998; 2006). Cats’ association with women has endured and morphed in time and place to encompass both negative (cats as symbols of promiscuity and aloofness; cats as companions for unmarried, unstable women) and positive (cats as Victorian symbols of caretaking) representations. In a visual study of attitudes toward cats and companionship during the first half of the 20th century, Arluke and Rolfe (2013) devote an entire chapter to analyzing gender displays in photographs of cats as “one more social field upon which people can ‘do gender’ with pets” (p. 80). The photos the authors

examined depicted a detached relationship between men and cats. Few men in these photos showed affection, such as holding or petting; rather, contact appeared to be incidental, as when cats were perched on a man's knee or when a man was holding a cat in place for a staged photo. These men appear to be engaging in distancing techniques (Goffman 1959) given that there are two exceptions to this detachment: when cats were pictured with men in recognizably “masculine” settings, such as a United States Navy ship or a railroad yard; or when the man was of a high social status, as in the case of President Calvin Coolidge holding his cat. In both cases, context implies no threat to masculinity, freeing the men in the photos from social constraints on affection for their cats.

Because of these associations, most literature on men and cats has focused on others' gendered perceptions of them, such as Mitchell and Ellis's (2013) finding that participants considered men labeled “cat people” less masculine, and Kogan and Volsche's (2020) finding that women rated men with cats in their profile photos less dateable on dating apps. In recent years, men have subverted this convention via the internet and other media, where men's fondness for the species and their close relationships with individual cats have become more visible. Some men have promoted their love of cats via various media where they regularly produce content showcasing their relationships with the cats they live with, as well as their knowledge of and affinity for the species. Jackson Galaxy—the heavily bearded, tattooed, and pierced star of “My Cat from Hell” and self-dubbed “Cat Daddy”—has garnered a large following via television, books, and social media to resolve cat guardians' misunderstandings of their companions' behavior. The Portland-based rapper Moshow, known as “The Cat Rapper,” regularly includes his cats in both his music and his social media presence, sharing photos and videos with his over 700,000 followers on Instagram and nearly 650,000 followers on Facebook.

Moshow additionally subverts traditionally masculine conventions, regularly donning brightly colored, cat-themed clothing and pushing his cats around in a stroller (Mosher and Palmieri 2021). Though plenty of research has detailed men's identity work with dogs, scant literature exists about identity work performed with cats. Examining how men construct their identity through a feminine-coded creature can provide insights on how men are challenging traditional expectations of masculinity. Additionally, as men become more visible advocates for the species, research on their relationships with cats can highlight the benefits of interacting with, and granting intersubjectivity to, these animals.

Feline Veterinarians

Veterinary encounters are significant sites for studying human-nonhuman relations as “the profession itself exemplifies the cultural ambiguity of animals as both subjects and objects” (Hobson-West and Jutel 2020:397). Veterinary identity work has become a research focus in recent years, perhaps due to wider recognition of the mental health crisis facing veterinarians (Nett et al. 2015; Volk et al. 2022). Most research to date focuses on how veterinarians interpret their professional identity. Armitage-Chan, Maddison, and May (2016), for example, discussed veterinarians' concepts of professionalism as encompassing the ability to multitask; handle challenges in their practices, such as emotion management and work-life balance; cope with high expectations set by themselves and others; and maintain productive team dynamics. Armitage-Chan and May (2018) further refined the veterinarian professional identity into two categories: diagnosis-focused, which centers clinical aspects of competence in diagnosing and treating animals, and challenge-focused, a relational identity which additionally incorporates the other aspects of veterinary practice. Following up on this study, Armitage-Chan (2020) found that veterinarians experience professional disillusionment when they fail to embrace one of these

identities fully. However, doing so is difficult, as the diagnosis identity is esteemed in society, while the relational identity is both more intrinsically satisfying and valued in the clinic setting. An inability to find balance between the self-concept and demands of the profession can have consequences for veterinarians' careers. For those with firmly rooted self-concepts, the veterinarian role tends to be their most prominent identity; however, those who experience tension between their self-concept and the work they do tend to seek new employment opportunities rather than compromise their identities (Page-Jones and Abbey 2015). Simultaneously, a durable sense of vocational identity—that is, the veterinary career path was a strong component of identity from a young age—correlated least with professional satisfaction and drive, and markedly so among younger veterinarians (Coke et al. 2020).

At the same time, few scholars have investigated the actual identity work that veterinarians perform in the course of practice. Irvine and Vermilya (2010) found that the practices and culture of veterinary medicine remain entrenched in masculinity; therefore, women veterinarians extoll the nurturing aspects of veterinary medicine, but downplay these characteristics in themselves. Instead, they emphasize the scientific aspects of their job, allowing them to claim a masculine-coded identity of competence and professionalism. Vermilya (2022) described the collective identity of veterinary students, comprising caregiving, advocacy, and legitimation of their medical expertise. To maintain this identity, students emphasize their scientific knowledge, comparing their expertise to that of those studying human medicine; positively construct the role of large animal medicine in public health and food security; and transfer blame to clients when moral quandaries arise in practice. A gap exists in current literature on how veterinarians who practice medicine for one species perform identity work, and how this work is influenced by interaction with their patients. The domestic cat is a fascinating

conduit for this research, given the relatively recent evolution of feline veterinary care alongside cats entering the human household and the status of cats in society. Furthermore, as veterinarians are viewed as accessible authorities in animal well-being, the products of their identity work can have important implications for shifting societal views regarding domestic cats as individuals warranting protection and better treatment.

Cat Fanciers

The cat fancy hobby “incorporates those who deliberately breed ‘pedigree’ cats...for their exhibition at ‘cat shows’ as a form of competition” in which cats are judged according to a set of guidelines governing their physical appearance and, to a lesser extent, temperament (Stone 2019:381). Cats bred for this purpose are registered with organizations such as the Cat Fanciers’ Association and The International Cat Association for the purpose of recording lineages and tracking show awards. These organizations additionally act as gatekeepers for cat breeds, maintaining and updating standards dictating every aspect of a given breed’s archetypical appearance, from eye color to nose length to coat texture.

Purebred domestic dogs are similarly judged by conformation to a set of physical standards, albeit with wide variation between breeds not seen in domestic cats. This gap exists mainly because in their early relationship with humans, dogs were bred to perform certain tasks, while breeding cats began as, and remains, an exercise in aesthetics (Kurushima et al. 2013; Lipinski et al. 2008). While many dog shows promote adherence to physical standards, others focus on dogs’ abilities, such as agility performance and scent work. Most cats, by their nature, are not inclined to participate in these types of activities; thus, cat shows focus solely on physical attributes. Stone (2019) argues that, for cats, this focus on appearance situates them at least partially as malleable objects, able to be changed for no reason other than to create visual appeal,

leading her to question the benefits of show participation for the cats themselves. While Stone found that several of her participants spent substantial time with their cats during shows—sitting next to their cages, talking to them, and engaging them with toys—only one of the 58 informants she interviewed discussed participation in terms of the cat’s enjoyment, and most respondents did not mention the value of human/cat bonding at shows. Furthermore, some cats likely experience stress or fear at shows due to their aversion to travel, unusual sights and smells, the presence of other cats, and excess handling by unfamiliar people.

The implication, then, is that cat shows disproportionately benefit cat guardians compared to their companions. Animal shows as a “means of establishing broader social networks” (Charles and Davies 2008:12) provide benefits to humans. For example, guardians benefit socially by being around individuals who are similarly dedicated to their cats and to the cat fancy hobby, a devotion that they feel makes them appear “crazy” to outsiders in a similar fashion to dog and horse hobbyists (Dashper 2017; Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2002; Stone 2019:384; Stone 2022). Participation within the show world is also an external marker of at least comfortable financial means, given the high costs involved with travel, cat care, show entry fees, and registration with cat fancy organizations. Serious breeders often make substantial changes to their homes and lifestyles to accommodate their cats’ needs and attend to kitten births. Breeding also represents a significant time investment; well-bred cats who win awards are presumed to reflect positively on their guardians and their skill in producing the perfect specimen that serves as validation of the cat fancier identity (Baldwin and Norris 1999).

Yet this identity is one of contention. As alluded to previously, people who breed and show cats have commented on their associates’ perceptions of them as mentally unstable due to their emotional and financial investment in their cats (Stone 2019). Some cat advocates argue

that recreational breeding is irresponsible due to the already staggering number of stray cats and those residing in shelters (Engelhardt 2020). Furthermore, ever-changing breed standards used for judging cats may create pressure on breeders to select for extreme physical morphisms that impact feline health. For example, brachycephalic cats—those with flat faces such that the skull is compressed and the nose is pushed inward—may suffer from respiratory, neurological, and dental problems (Farnworth et al. 2016; Schmidt et al. 2017). Up to now, little is known about how cat fanciers perform identity work in the context of a hobby that simultaneously seems to advocate for and potentially work against cats' interests. These individuals cross symbolic boundaries via close contact with and investment in cats; however, the cat fancy hobby arguably pushes cats closer to object than subject with its emphasis on physical characteristics and breeding a “better” cat. Furthermore, while abundant research examines how hobbies shape identity, there is little to none about how interactions with the cats themselves contribute to the cat fancier identity.

Cat Rescuers

Early animal protection movements in the United States did little to care for community cats due to difficulties posed by capturing and restraining them (Davis 2016). Furthermore, unowned cats were widely disparaged, resulting in little motivation to ensure their welfare. Today, advocacy groups exist for these contested animals, but the majority of hands-on work on behalf of these cats' well-being is performed by volunteers, who may or may not be affiliated with rescue organizations. Caring for community cats can range from feeding the cats in one's own backyard to working with others as part of a concerted effort to implement trap-neuter-

return (TNR) programs¹ for cats in the larger community. Motivations for doing this generally unpaid, largely unappreciated work include love for cats; a desire to safeguard them from euthanasia; and ensuring their health and safety (Centonze and Levy 2002; Crawford et al. 2023). Unsurprisingly, animal welfare volunteers report that these ideals arise from such internalized values as compassion and desire to help the unfortunate (Neumann 2010).

Despite these seemingly laudable intentions, cat rescuers are routinely stigmatized and ridiculed. Thompson (2012:84) notes, “The problematic status of feral cats is rooted in their existence outside of their assumed proper place and apart from human control.” Thus the community cat caretaker is so characterized; their association with an unsympathetic animal renders their motives suspicious and their actions inscrutable. Skeptics cast aspersions on the community cat caretaker, ranging from mental health challenges (Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000) to deceit (Dauphiné and Cooper 2009), fanaticism (Thompson 2012; Young and Thompson 2020), and science denial (Lynn 2019). Given the domestic cat’s longstanding association with women, it is unsurprising that many of these indictments are highly gendered, evoking the crazy cat lady stereotype in an effort to discredit caregivers’ work (Probyn-Rapsey 2019). Furthermore, cat caretakers are characterized as overly emotional—again, an accusation laced with gendered implications that devalues care in favor of logic and rationality. In response to critics labeling cat caretakers’ motives as “bleeding-heart,” “weak,” and an outgrowth of “the Disney syndrome,” McCubbin and Van Patter (2020:10; 15) contend that the former two descriptors serve to demean care work, while “invoking ‘Disney’ characterizes these practices

¹In the TNR process, cats are humanely trapped; taken to a veterinarian, where they are desexed and sometimes vaccinated; ear tipped, wherein the tip of the ear is removed to signal that the cat has already been spayed or neutered; and released back to the area where they were captured in an effort to naturally decrease their population through controlling reproduction.

and those who enact them as infantile... eroding any credibility or the possibility that cat caretaking could be motivated by anything other than a misguided excess of (feminine) care.”

Though the motivations and perceptions of cat rescuers have been subject to research, less is known about their identity work, even as Samdahl (2015:104) contends that “*Being* an animal rescuer is central to the way many committed volunteers view themselves; it is a salient component of their identities” (emphasis original). Young and Thompson (2017) studied how cat caretakers use identity talk and aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) among themselves to enact moral identities and problem solve. Research on volunteer identities may point to some general tenets guiding the cat rescuer’s identity. For example, Grube and Piliavin (2000) and Finkelstein, Penner, and Brannick (2005) found that others’ expectations strongly predicted individuals’ role identities as volunteers; however, this does not appear to be the case for cat rescuers, given the persistent stigma they face. Alternatively, volunteerism among cat rescuers may be expected to align more closely with their core self, which does not necessarily align with enacted role identities (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980). Indeed, Hitlin (2003) reported significant correlation between the volunteer identity and valuing the prosocial principles of benevolence and universalism. Therefore, looking to both personal and social identities will be instructive in theorizing the identities of this group. Doing so will address a scarce literature base about the identity work of rescuers who act on behalf of not only a contested species, but an extremely contentious subset of that species.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Over the past several decades, sociological study about interactions with nonhuman animals has grown at an impressive rate. Scholars such as Sanders, Arluke, and Irvine have successfully contested long-outdated views of animals as Cartesian automatons through

centering their contributions to human society. In doing so, they and other scholars have created a rich rendering of the benefits of granting nonhumans subjectivity and selfhood, positioning interspecies interactions as both meaningful and relational. Current animal studies scholars have benefited tremendously from a robust body of work describing the tenets of selfhood applied to the nonhuman subject; symbolic interactionism within and between species; and how nonhumans co-construct social life.

Yet it is inevitable that gaps remain in this literature base, given its relatively young age. Over twenty years beyond Sanders' (2003) observation about identity effects of dogs in human spaces, while sociologists have crafted an impressive base of literature detailing how identity is created on nonhumans' behalf, less is yet known about how interaction with other animals transforms the human identity. Specifically, few, if any, studies have examined how identity is shaped through interaction with domestic cats, who live in tens of millions of homes in the United States and constitute important social and familial relationships. Furthermore, until use of the internet became widespread, most human and cat relationships were relatively hidden, resulting in misunderstanding of the importance of cats to many humans' lives and selves.

This study will contribute to a shallow literature base about the identity effects resulting from interaction with nonhumans—specifically, domestic cats, troubling subjects due to their position on the boundary between domesticated and wild. In an accounting of sociological study of human-nonhuman interaction, Cerulo (2009:537) called for systematic investigation of “how humans take the role of the animal and construct and deconstruct interspecies boundaries...[and] how humans and animals read one another's gestures and negotiate a social and cultural order that facilitates both intra- and interspecies interaction.” This study examines how individuals perform identity work that positions cats as social actors in their self-concepts to inform the

research question, “How do members of different social groups outwardly identifying as having an interest in domestic cats use the same species to construct their personal and social identities?” Broadly using a symbolic interaction lens, several sub-questions inform data analysis, including (1) What are the similarities and differences in identity work between these groups, and why do they occur? and (2) How does identity work translate into resisting or reinforcing boundaries with, and social construction of, domestic cats? Studying these processes will add to knowledge about how interaction with other species contributes to understanding of the self; how this understanding intersects with other facets of identity, such as gender, profession, hobbies, and personal values; and how challenging the human-nonhuman boundary manifests for a contested species. In the following chapter, I detail the methods I used to examine these phenomena.

Chapter 3 Research Methods

In this chapter, I will detail the research methods I used to investigate the following research question: How do members of different social groups outwardly identifying as having an interest in domestic cats use the same species to construct their personal and social identities? My discussion begins with a brief synopsis of the suitability of qualitative methods for exploring my research question. Next, I discuss the methods I used to recruit participants; ensure ethical practices; collect and analyze data; and present my findings. I conclude with a discussion of my positionality in respect to this study, the field of sociology, and my obligations to the co-creators of my research.

QUALITATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY

This study's central question aligns with qualitative epistemology, as it does not aim to correlate a set of pre-defined variables with a social phenomenon. Rather, my research question seeks to uncover the meanings and subsequent actions tied to established outcomes; in the words of Mahoney and Goertz (2006:229), I take a "causes-of-effects approach" rather than a "effects-of-causes approach." Qualitative analysis seeks to uncover the mechanisms (Miles and Huberman 1994), processes (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), and "deeper and richer" local context (Goodwin and Horowitz 2002:44) surrounding a phenomenon, rather than the statistical qualities of specific variables that may influence its emergence. The present study, with its ultimate emphasis on the betterment of life for cats, centers around how humans understand their relationships with cats; the ways individuals understand these interactions as driving the formation of their identities; and their resultant behaviors as a function of both individual understanding and social influences. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) point out, human behavior and actions must be contextualized through individuals' meaning-making and motivations, which

cannot be reduced to a set of concrete variables; rather, understanding requires allowing participants to provide insight into their unique internal makeup. Qualitative methods thus provide a natural avenue through which to pursue these questions, or, as Becker (1996:56) invites researchers, “to describe a system of relationships, to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence.”

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

My study details the openly cat-centric identity work of people spanning four different identities, including men who openly exhibit their love for cats on social media; veterinarians who practice feline medicine; cat fanciers, or hobbyists; and those who are involved with community cat rescue. These groups were chosen for the reasons outlined in the introduction to this manuscript, in accordance with grounded theory’s emphasis on theoretical sampling. As Charmaz (2001:689) writes, “Theoretical sampling, that is, sampling to develop the researcher’s theory, not to represent a population, endows grounded theory studies with analytic power.” In essence, this approach strengthens a qualitative researcher’s conclusions by sampling for the exact attribute they wish to examine rather than ensuring random representation to capture the “average” individual’s perspective. In the following section, I will provide for each group a general description of its participants, inclusion criteria for participation, and recruitment strategies utilized. See Appendix A for recruitment messages for each group.

Men

Individuals who identified as men and were over the age of 18 at the time of the interview were invited to participate in this study. After conducting one interview through purposive sampling, I recruited men from the social media platforms Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram, given their popularity as sites of outward-facing identity work. Initially, I contacted

18 frequent contributors to Reddit's MenSmittenWithKittens community through the site's direct messaging function, which resulted in five interviews. I then turned to Twitter and Instagram to recruit the remainder of my 20 interviews, using the hashtags #catman, #catdad, and #catguy to attract participants. Though the majority of my participants were from the United States, I interviewed three men in Canada, one in Malta, and one in Peru.

Feline Veterinarians

For this study, I interviewed veterinarians who solely practiced feline medicine in their everyday profession. That is, I excluded general small animal veterinarians—who may also treat dogs, rabbits, and other species. To recruit veterinarians from various areas of the United States, I used the website random.org (Randomness and Integrity Services Ltd. 2024) to generate random zip codes, which I then used to search the directory of the American Association of Feline Practitioners (2024) website. For each zip code, I searched for feline-only clinics within 100 miles. If there were multiple practitioners listed at a single clinic, I chose the practitioner at the top of the list. In an effort to protect participant identities, once I contacted a veterinarian at a given clinic, others at that clinic were not recruited. Initially, I sought to recruit veterinarians through email; however, given the difficulty of finding individuals' email addresses, I instead sent personalized invitation letters through U.S. mail. In total, I sent 125 letters, which resulted in 20 interviews. Eighteen interviewees were the veterinarians to whom the letter was mailed; the remaining two were clinic associates referred by the veterinarians who received the letter, but who did not personally participate. I spoke with two men, and the remainder of my participants were women, consistent with current veterinary demographics.

Cat Fanciers

I operationalized cat fanciers as adults who showed their cats in events sanctioned by either the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) or The International Cat Association (TICA), the two largest United States-based cat fancy organizations. I compiled a list of the Breed Council (CFA) and Breed Committee (TICA) leadership from the associations' respective websites (CFA 2024a; TICA 2023) and contacted potential participants via email. I then asked leaders for referrals to other fanciers in hopes of capturing both leadership and "regular" member perspectives. I interviewed a total of 16 participants, 12 of whom served in leadership roles. Four participants were men, and 12 were women. All resided in the United States.

Cat Rescuers

Cat rescuers were defined for the purposes of this project as any adult individual who served in either a paid or volunteer capacity as a caretaker for community—or unowned—cats. I recruited cat caretakers in both Colorado and Florida through purposive and snowball sampling using personal contacts in each state. The four initial interviewees I spoke with identified two additional participants. To recruit the remainder of my 12 interviewees, I emailed Colorado and Florida members of the Alley Cat Allies Feral Friends Network, a database of individuals and organizations who provide assistance and resources for community cat caretaking (Alley Cat Allies 2024b). I chose to recruit participants from those two states for consistency in location with my previous interviewees. Of my 12 participants in this group, 11 were women and one was a man.

When a potential interviewee contacted me and expressed interest in participating, I first answered any questions they had, then directed them to Calendly, an online scheduling service, where they could select a day and time that worked well for them. I maintained open availability

on Mondays, Fridays, and Wednesday afternoons, and invited participants to contact me directly if they needed to schedule outside these times. If a potential participant expressed interest, but did not schedule through Calendly, I followed up one time with a reminder email, generally sent within a few weeks of the initial exchange. Once participants chose a date and time through Calendly, they received a standardized email confirmation through the system. I also received notifications each time a new meeting was scheduled, and emailed participants a personalized confirmation containing general interview information, a Zoom link, and the approved informed consent document.

ETHICS AND PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

The study was submitted to the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and declared exempt (protocol #22-0239) on May 16, 2022. Prior to beginning each interview, I verified with the participant that they had read the informed consent document. For those who had not, I gave them time to read the document, either on their own screen or through Zoom's screen share function. After verifying that interviewees had read the form, I obtained each participant's verbal consent to proceed with the interview, record the interview, and reveal their identity to any subsequent referrals, if applicable. Interview recordings where verbal consent was given will be retained for three years beyond the study's closure, as required by CU Boulder's IRB regulations.

Though this dissertation does not contain sensitive data, and the risk of harm through accidental release of interview data is minimal, all participants are individually identifiable only to me. All original data (digital audio recordings, digital video recordings, typed interview transcripts, and typed memos) are stored on my password-protected computer and my password-protected, two-factor authentication iCloud storage. I am the only individual with access to the

computer and iCloud storage. Data will be retained according to the security provisions above until I determine it merits no further analysis.

Quotes from interviews and excerpts from memos are presented in writing as part of the findings of this dissertation; however, I have promised participants that I will not use their names or other identifying information. Out of an abundance of caution for protecting participant privacy, pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants; these will carry over to any subsequent publications or presentations. Though I recognize the value of sharing some data with other researchers, I do not plan to share data from this project in qualitative archives for several reasons. The first reason is logistical. In my consent forms, developed in concert with my university's IRB, I have assured participants that I would be the only researcher with access to the data. The second reason is epistemological. Following the lead of Feldman and Shaw (2019:701), I believe that "there are particular costs involved in treating qualitative evidence as a commodity that can readily be shared among users." In particular, qualitative analysis rests on the assumption that meaning is co-produced between researcher and participant. Divorced from this context, and from the primary researcher, the data become less meaningful and analysis risks insufficient perspective. In this spirit, I believe my data belong to me and my participants, and the resulting products should therefore be created with the same understanding I gave them at the beginning of the project: that they and I would be the authors of their stories.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interview is a venerable pillar of qualitative sociological methods. It allows researchers to extensively explore questions encompassing many different axes of meaning, such as individuals' values (Johnson 2001), interactions with others (Roulston and Choi 2018), and

emotions (Pugh 2013). Interviews facilitate rich discussion of identity, including meaning-making processes, constructed boundaries, and imagined alternatives (Lamont and Swidler 2014). They also give a direct voice to participants, allowing them to construct and describe their inner and external lives in ways that make sense to them. Allowing individuals—especially those who identify with a marginalized group—to disclose their lived realities can even be a powerful step in addressing exploitation (Charmaz 2014). Interviewees are not, however, the sole contributors to interview data.

Interviews can be accurately characterized as a negotiated conversation between the researcher and the participant (Fontana and Frey 2000; Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin 2012). Together, interviewee and interviewer construct an active dialogue, imbued with meaning by both parties as they aim to produce rich information (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). This co-production affords both parties the opportunity to guide the conversation in directions that are perhaps unexpected, but nonetheless provide veins of valuable information. In accordance with “sequential interviewing” (Small 2009:24), flexible qualitative interviewing methods, and constructivist grounded theory, which calls for constant comparative analysis, some interview questions changed during the process (Charmaz 2001; Rubin and Rubin 2012; Warren 2001). For example, I found early in my interviews that the question, “Describe your relationship with your cat(s)” was incomplete in capturing the perception of a named relationship (e.g., friend, parent/child) between person and cat. This was a suitable opening question to continue establishing rapport, introduce me to the interviewee, and begin with a topic participants found enjoyable to talk about, allowing them to ease into the interview (Fothergill and Peek 2015). However, while the question provided critical introductory and contextual information, I found that the question as written did not provide the level of detail about identity that I sought. Thus, I

reworded the question to, “Describe your relationship with your cat(s). Who are they to you, and who are you to them?” Furthermore, interviews’ flexibility afforded me the ability to solicit clarification and elaboration, as well as utilize probes and ask other questions that arose organically in conversation. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything that I did not ask about that they wished to share with me, which gave them an opening to take the interview in any direction they wished. This open-ended opportunity facilitated “the constructionist epistemological leanings undergirding much of qualitative research” (Warren 2001:86), while my interview guides ensured that my preceding questions encompassed important aspects of sociological identity theory.

I designed my semi-structured interview guides (see Appendix B) using identity literature to create questions surrounding self-perception, others’ perceptions, and change over time (Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin 2011; Brekhus 2008; Erickson 1995; Francis and Adams 2019; Howard 2000; McAdams 2011; Snow and Anderson 1987). Each group’s interview questions were tailored toward their specific identities, and the cat fancier group’s guide included questions about leadership if the participant held such a position within their association. Initially, I adhered very strictly to the interview guide; however, as interviews proceeded, I found myself able to allow the participant to go the direction they wished while weaving in prompts to elicit the necessary information, as predicted by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

Interview Process

Another strength of interviewing is that it can serve as a form of observation (Lamont and Swidler 2014). Traditionally, face-to-face interviews have been the preferred standard for research, as they allow the interviewer to observe body language and emotional signals, as well as enable rapport (Rubin and Rubin 2012). However, the advent of videoconferencing

technology such as Skype and Zoom—and the general public’s widespread familiarity with these technologies due to the COVID-19 pandemic—has given rise to many of the benefits of face-to-face discussion. One major advantage of conducting interviews via a virtual platform is increased geographic scope (Olliffe et al. 2021). While this study is not aiming for generalizability *per se*, the ability to interview informants from different geographic areas increases heterogeneity among respondents and invites differences, if they are present, to emerge. All interviews, with the exception of three, took place over Zoom. Of the three interviews that took place via alternate platforms, two were conducted via telephone and one was conducted via Google Meet.

Virtual interviews also allow both interviewer and interviewee to choose a setting where they are most comfortable, facilitating open dialogue about the self (Adler and Adler 2003) and decreasing the likelihood that the participant is engaging in “active stigma management” (Jenner and Myers 2019:172). Allowing participants to conduct virtual interviews from home is not only convenient; it allows them to be more relaxed, which may prompt more candid responses. It also affords the interviewer a window into the participant’s home and surroundings, which can serve as significant context (Olliffe et al. 2021). In the present study, identity cues often took the form of participants introducing me to their cats or showing me pictures. Other identity markers were often visible as well, including cat décor; cat effects, such as climbing furniture and bedding; and ribbons won at shows.

This mutual exchange of environmental cues also allowed participants to confirm my identity as an insider and a fellow cat lover, in accordance with Harrington’s (2003:611) assertion that “identity claims must be validated by participants in order for researchers to gain access to information.” This most often took the form of my long-haired black cat, Penny, jumping into my lap or walking across my desk in front of my camera, prompting responses such as, “Oh,

look! I used to have a cat that looked just like that!” or “Hi, pretty girl!” In addition to confirming identity claims, Gray and colleagues (2020) point out that allowing participants to see into the interviewer’s personal space interrupts potential issues of hierarchy and confers a more casual tone. Prior to each interview, I exchanged emails with participants, not only to confirm interview logistics, but to introduce the study and build a sense of acquaintance (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). These emails gave participants access to my conversational style and conferred the sense that the interview would not be a rigid occasion filled with academic jargon, but one where they could feel relaxed and free to be candid.

Oliffe and colleagues (2021) described a few disadvantages of virtual interviewing, including what they refer to as “choppy purviews” (p. 5), or the possibility of interference due to technological realities such as connection issues, lag, and poor video quality. Though I did experience each of these across my 69 interviews, glitches were fortunately brief and did not compromise interview quality. Again, due to the proliferation of Zoom meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, I surmise that most participants were accustomed to making small adjustments to their video, audio, or other settings. The largest glitch I experienced was due to my lack of a backup platform, a strategy recommended by Gray and colleagues (2020) to avoid interruption. As noted above, one interview took place on Google Meet, a plan the participant and I hastily arranged over email when we couldn’t figure out why I couldn’t hear them on Zoom. Being unfamiliar with the platform—and admittedly, a bit flustered—I didn’t take time to figure out how to record. All other interviews were audio recorded; in this case, however, I took copious notes by hand, including direct quotes where possible. In addition, all Zoom interviews, except two in which participants declined, were captured on video. Interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to one hour and 55 minutes, with the average interview lasting 57 minutes. Each

audio file was transcribed using an auto-transcription service—either Rev.com or NVivo—and after transcription was complete, I re-listened to each interview, making corrections to the transcript as necessary and re-familiarizing myself with its content.

Compensation

As a small token of appreciation for their time and sharing their knowledge, I offered each participant an incentive of 15 dollars. I decided this was an appropriate amount, taking into consideration ease of participating, interviews' non-sensitive subject matter, and the minimal time commitment. Most participants received an electronic gift card to Amazon.com, but two interviewees asked me to donate the equivalent in cash to charitable causes for cats, which I gladly did. Several participants declined the incentive, stating that they were happy to participate without it. In addition to the gift card, I sent a physical note of thanks to veterinarians, as they were the only group for which I had mailing addresses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach, which departs from traditional grounded theory in its flexibility and recognition of multiple, relative realities versus one true, fixed reality (Charmaz 2000; Charmaz 2008). The constructivist angle of this approach redefines some of the constraints of traditional grounded theory and is particularly useful for studies situated in the Blumerian concept of meaning (Blumer 1969; Charmaz 2000). For example, grounded theory as conceived of by Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasizes strict researcher objectivity, while constructivist grounded theory places the researcher in the role of partner in “mutual creation of knowledge” and “interpretive understanding” (Charmaz 2000:510).

While constructivist grounded theory updates some of the epistemological underpinnings of traditional grounded theory to incorporate interpretive leanings, many of the analytic procedures remain the same. Interviewing and coding took place simultaneously, allowing me to form ideas about the data as I collected it, which in turn informed subsequent interviews. I coded interviews in three phases: open coding, or assigning initial codes to interview text; focused coding, or examining codes for significance and reoccurrence; and synthesis, or creating overarching categories to describe the data and begin moving toward a cohesive analytic framework (Charmaz 2001; Kenny and Fourie 2015). Throughout analysis, I used identity as a sensitizing concept—an overarching reference point for interpretation, but one that lacks specific context (Blumer 1954).

During the simultaneous interviewing and coding processes, I engaged in constant comparison: interview to interview, group to group, code to code, and story to story. This process sparked ideas about connections, highlighted differences, and contributed to category development. Comparison further contributed to analytical memo writing, which I used to organize and clarify my ideas as I moved through analysis. Memos ranged from a single line (e.g., “Why is it acceptable to tell people you don’t like cats, especially people like cat vets who have literally just told you this is their career?”) to multi-page documents containing analytical insights, questions about categorization, and notes for theoretical integration. I used ATLAS.ti qualitative software to code interview transcripts, refine codes, and write analytic memos (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH 2024).

Saturation

Grounded theory places emphasis on theoretical saturation, or the point at which the researcher gleans no new substantive insights from the data to inform the nascent theory. Glaser

(2001:191) advocated use of the constant comparison method to examine constructs within the data “until no new properties of the pattern emerge.” While this directive seems fairly straightforward, differences in researcher standpoint, as well as study context, mean that in practice, it is difficult for researchers to accurately convey how they determine saturation and therefore justify their sample sizes (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018). This conundrum often leads researchers to claim that “saturation was achieved” without providing clues as to how they determined this endpoint (Morse 2015; Francis et al. 2010).

Accordingly, some qualitative scholars have attempted to quantify the evergreen question of how many interviews are enough to demonstrate a study’s rigor. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) identified 97% of the significant themes in their dataset by the time they had coded 12 interviews. In a non-grounded theory study, Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) attained code saturation—that is, assigned codes demonstrated conceptual strength—at 9 interviews, and over half of codes were developed from the first interview. However, the authors found that between 16 and 24 interviews were necessary to “provide depth, richness, and complexities” (Hennink et al. 2017:605). Similarly, in a meta-analysis of non-grounded theory qualitative studies, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found that researchers reported saturation after an average of 12 to 13 interviews.

Despite similarities in qualitative epistemology, as well as the pursuit for a complete account of meaning rather than simple code frequency, these authors’ attempts to quantify saturation may be unsuitable for grounded theory studies, given the approach’s emphasis on theoretical sampling. Low (2019:135) additionally contends that obsessing over the number of interviews in a grounded theory study is counterproductive, reminding researchers that the “unit of analysis in a grounded theory project is the concept, not the case.” She further argues that

analysis is an ongoing process, and new understandings of the data are continually emergent. This assertion is echoed by Braun and Clarke (2021) in the context of co-production of meaning between researcher and participants, citing the researcher's positional judgment as a critical element of saturation.

Given the lack of clear guidelines regarding interview saturation—which perhaps indicates the difficulty of conclusively defining a necessarily fluid process—scholars have proposed several methods of determining saturation in qualitative studies. For example, Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) proposed the concept of information power, which examines saturation in the context of data quality and fit with theory. Morse (1995:148) calls for “enough data to build a comprehensive and convincing theory,” in line with grounded theory's emphasis on theoretical sampling. For this study, I chose to employ Nelson's (2017:559) concept of “sufficiency of conceptual depth,” using five criteria to evaluate my data's sufficiency as I built my analytical framework. The first indicator is *range*, or adequate support of the conceptual categories within the data. As with other measures of saturation, adequate support refers not to frequency of codes, but full range of meaning. The second measure, *complex connections*, refers to strong relationships across the data, as well as use of theoretical, rather than descriptive codes. The third criterion, *subtlety*, signifies that the researcher has detected and articulated nuances in the data rather than generating superficial analysis. The fourth measure is *resonance*, or robust ties to existing theory and use of literature to reinforce findings. The last indicator is *validity*, or credibility and expediency to other researchers and the population being studied. Nelson (2017) presents a scale for evaluating each criterion from low to high, with examples for each indicator. I considered my analysis complete when I could honestly assign a high value to most of the

measures of conceptual depth, recognizing that my close relationship to the data may influence my rating and others may rank the criteria differently.

Presentation of Findings

My use of constructivist grounded theory methods is further reflected in my writing choices. Hallberg (2006) points out that constructivist grounded theory studies generally do not result in presenting a unified theory; rather, they are presented as a narrative imbued with the meanings of social processes. Accordingly, my findings and discussion exist alongside one another and are buttressed by foundational literature (Charmaz 2014). This technique differs from traditional positivist structures dictating distinct findings and analysis sections to highlight the process of abstraction. However, as Kenny and Fourie (2015:1279) point out, the “narrative approach to GT does not neglect abstraction as it weaves conceptualization into description.” In other words, theoretical grounding integrated with descriptive empirical evidence tells a holistic story about the groups I studied and their sociological underpinnings. Specifically, I use a framework of identity transformation catalyzed by interaction with nonhuman animals to theorize human-cat interactions and their metamorphic effects on identity.

Analytical Framework

In contextualizing my analysis, I employ a three-phase framework developed by Diane Dutton (2012) to describe a process of individuals’ identity transformations via interaction with nonhuman animals. In developing this approach, Dutton (2012:93) called attention to social scientists’ disengagement from everyday, routine interactions with other animals: “Within such a framework, the meaning of action and interaction becomes so detached from the lived, embodied reality of everyday experience that there can be no obvious connection, no bridge, to understanding other species.” Rather, Dutton advances a phenomenological approach—that is,

one that prioritizes lived experience encompassing both the corporeal and the cognitive. As Polkinghorne (1989:42) noted, “Experience is a reality that results from the openness of human awareness to the world, and it cannot be reduced to either the sphere of the mental or the sphere of the physical.” Further recognizing the situated nature of human-nonhuman interactions, Dutton identified three “psychocultural themes” (Csordas 1994:15), or assumptions, to orient these lived experiences: a level of intimacy appropriate to the relationship; consideration of the nonhuman as an individual; and awareness of the nonhuman’s alterity, or their “otherness.” These tenets guide analysis through three phases of the human-nonhuman relationship that ultimately result in identity transformation, which I use to structure my findings.

The first phase describes *embodied experiences* between human and nonhuman, which Dutton (2012:99) describes as “an initial shift in attention manifesting as an increased awareness of one’s own or another’s bodily state, together with a reflection upon this awareness.” These are, for the purposes of the present study, the everyday experiences—the interactive exchanges between human and cat—that characterize each group’s relationship with the species, whether from a relational, professional, or justice-seeking perspective. In minding these interactions, Dutton contends, we can understand the aspects of the self that arise from our bodily experiences. Emerging from embodied experiences, the next phase is *attunement*, or “the gradual cohering of intention and action through close familiarity” (Dutton 2012:103). That is, we become attuned to intersubjective others when we have developed an intertwined sense of their intentions and subsequent actions and adjust our own accordingly. Over time, and through increased fluency with the other individual, these progressions of intention and action are not consciously derived; rather, as Shapiro (1990:192) posits, “Through my lived body, I accompany yours as it intends an object.” The final phase is *transformation*, in which attunement results in

subjects “co-creat[ing] a new, shared, intersubjective meaning and identity” (Dutton 2012:105). These identities arise through meaningful interaction in the previous two phases, resulting in both human and nonhuman possessing equal standing in generating new conceptions of the self.

In using Dutton’s framework, I contextualize participants’ identities through highlighting the various processes that lead to identity transformation as a result of routine interactions with domestic cats, whether they are ongoing or fleeting. In addition, I return to the psychocultural themes proposed by Dutton in my conclusion, considering their relevance to each of my four groups’ identity processes. Furthermore, these themes bolster development of a continuum characterizing my groups’ varying levels of engagement with domestic cats as agentic subjects and the identities that support these relationships.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

McCorkel and Myers (2003:200), in describing hesitation to examine one’s own identity in the context of research, speculate that “The groundedness of identity claims threatens to unearth those ghosts we are trained to ritualistically bury at the start of our research projects: bias and subjectivity.” However, as a qualitative researcher dedicated to the principle of co-production of meaning, it is important to overtly disclose these potential points of alignment or friction (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Goodwin and Horowitz 2002). In considering my own identity, I acknowledge four relevant standpoints that influenced this project: my insider status as a cat person; my role as an academic researcher; an assumed connection between animal studies and activism; and my values as a trained anthrozoologist.

Cat Person

I often refer to myself as a cat lady, or cat person, a status I gladly shared with my participants. Though I adopted these monikers readily, I did not tell interviewees what I meant by

them, as I sought to glean what the term meant to participants. Also, nobody ever asked what I meant by it; they knew, either because they consider themselves a cat person, or because they are closely aligned with others who do. Most often, the opportunity to share this identity arose when participants asked what inspired this project. I told them, “Well, first of all, I’m an unapologetic cat lady.” Sometimes, they didn’t ask, but I assigned myself this label naturally in conversation.

This native role (Adler and Adler 1987) as a cat person worked to my advantage with my participants. The cat person facet of my identity allowed me to “gain access to information,” as I was “categorized as sharing a valued social identity with participants or as enhancing that identity through [my] research” (Harrington 2003:609). Openly identifying as a cat person facilitated rapport, as well as identity confirmation for interviewees. This often took the form of engaging in cat person culture through shared experience and language (Harrington and Fine 2000). For example, one interviewee talked about how their cat provided a sense of being “alone while still having a companion.” They noted the paradoxical implications of this statement, then said, “I feel like you understand what I'm talking about because you're a cat person.” Another interviewee talked about participating in the #Caturday hashtag on Twitter, a meme in which people share pictures of their cats on Saturdays. These shared fragments of cat person culture facilitated conversation, which may have also increased feelings of trust and willingness to share. On a final note, I was surprised, and heartened, by how many of my participants expressed interest in reading this project upon its completion. In gratitude to my fellow cat people, I will share the online link to this manuscript.

Researcher/“Expert”

As a researcher, especially one who studies a relatively niche topic, I recognize that sometimes my interactions with participants may confer an unsolicited expectation that I’m an

“expert.” The power balance between interviewer and interviewee is generally understood to be hierarchical, given that the researcher possesses a set of specific expertise and directs the conversation. Furthermore, the purpose-directed tone of the interview may lead interviewees to question whether they are truly giving the information the researcher seeks (Kvale 2007).

Despite this innate power imbalance, I never felt as if my interviewees were uncomfortable talking with me. Most participants seemed fairly at ease and even eager to talk about cats with me. However, I encountered a number of interviewees who seemed concerned with giving me the “correct” information—not correct in the sense of telling me what I wanted to hear, but correct in the sense of staying on-topic. I anticipate this is likely the case in many interview studies. The number of people who apologized for “talking way too long” or prefaced statements with “Not to go off on a tangent, but...” was notable enough that I added a brief statement at the end of my opening script telling them to talk as much about each question as they wished, and not to worry about straying off-topic, as qualitative researchers see every utterance as data.

As Naples (2003) pointed out, the power differential between researcher and researched does not end with data collection, but extends through the writing process, where scholars must decide what information to present and how to present it. Fine (1993:287) contended that “In protecting people, organizations, and scenes, we shade some truths, ignore others, and create fictive personages to take pressure off real ones.” That is, if researchers feel connected with our participants, or sympathetic toward them, we risk hiding truths contained in the data that may be perceived as undesirable (Kleinman and Kolb 2011). Because my topic was not particularly controversial, I didn’t anticipate this issue arising with most of my participants. However, given my views on animal overpopulation, and the importance of cat adoption in particular, I worried

when writing that I may betray my cat fancier participants—who were, to a person, kind, thoughtful, and generous with their time—by seemingly critiquing aspects of the hobby that may be construed as problematic. However, I remained committed to two guiding principles as I wrote my findings. First, as a researcher, I seek to neither endorse nor condemn specific practices, but to describe the larger social milieu in which they take place and situate it within sociological theory. Second, as I describe below, the aim of this work is multifaceted and emerges from a desire to advance the status of cats in society. Ensuring that I adhered to these ideals as I wrote renewed my sense of purpose and fairness to all co-creators of this narrative.

Animal Studies and Activism

Unfortunately, and unfairly, sometimes research about human-nonhuman relationships is conflated with alignment with animal rights groups that espouse views and employ tactics characterized as extreme. Again, this was not necessarily a roadblock I anticipated encountering, but I wanted to be alert in case the issue arose. I only experienced pushback from one potential cat fancy participant, who was concerned that (1) I was coming from a standpoint against living with companion animals, and (2) that I would report them for having more than the number of cats allowed by law in their locality. I was eager to interview this person, as I suspected they had some formative experiences that contributed to their skepticism about my aims. However, they never scheduled an interview, despite several exchanges that seemed to reassure them about my purpose.

Anthrozoology and the Good of Cats

Writing about the political nature of some qualitative research, Goodwin and Horowitz (2002:39) asked, “For whom does the researcher speak? Are there groups whose voices we *do not* (or *cannot*) hear?” (emphasis added). In a literal sense, we *cannot* hear other animals’ voices,

as we do not share a common language. Therefore, they cannot articulate their needs in ways that humans deem valid. We cannot, for example, ask them to compose a list of their demands, as if they are a labor union on strike. In a more realistic sense, we *do not* hear animals. Anybody who has lived with a companion animal knows the ways they communicate: the dog wags her tail and runs to the door when we pick up her leash, or the cat begins purring when we scratch his back. On a larger scale, we can imagine that animals who are treated cruelly in large-scale agricultural operations, displaced from their natural homes, or starved due to climate change would revolt if they had the means; however, humans not hearing these pleas depends on upending long-held societal norms surrounding capitalism and consumption.

This is especially problematic when social science researchers—those who hold the power to influence the ways we understand these societal norms—ignore the reality of nonhuman life as it intertwines with our own. In particular, sociology’s reluctance to recognize the critical ways in which nonhumans contribute to society is a result of longstanding anthropocentric claims in the field. These range from elevating humans in order to be taken seriously as a discipline (Irvine 2012); to neglect of the moral duties that establishing personhood entails (Irvine 2007; Alger and Alger 2003b); to fear of inattention to human oppression (Arluke 2002; Perrow 2000). Assertions that other animals—who live in our houses, provide us with a source of calories, serve as test subjects for our safety, and are paraded around for our entertainment, to mention only a few roles—are not integral to understanding society are troubling. Particularly in the context of a country where 66% of households contain a companion animal (American Pet Products Association 2023), this curious tendency toward separation of human sociality from that of other species leads anthropologist Anna Tsing (2014:27) to conclude, “How could it have ever occurred to anyone that living things other than humans are

not social? The more one thinks about it, the more ridiculous an opposition between human sociality and non-human—what? ‘non-sociality’?—becomes.”

Social psychologists have revealed the irrational nature of this separation through studies of interaction, demonstrating that nonhuman animals are capable of fulfilling the role of generalized other (Young 2013); co-creating symbolic meaning with humans (Brandt 2004); and participating in meaningful joint action and emotion production (Alger and Alger 1997; Sanders 2007). Furthermore, these scholars have demonstrated that self and identity construction take place between human and nonhuman actors in many of the same ways that the process occurs between humans (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Austin and Irvine 2020; Sanders 1993; Taylor 2007). This foundational work on intersubjectivity and imparted personhood creates a path for “problematiz[ing] ‘the social’ in social sciences” (Cudworth 2011:13) and situating animals as subjects of study in their own right, which I see as a critical goal for sociological study in the field of anthrozoology.

I am an anthrozoologist by training. The organized discipline under the term anthrozoology—also known as *human-animal studies* or simply *animal studies*—is a new addition to the academy, though scholars have been performing anthrozoological research under the banners of their individual disciplines for many years. Simply defined, anthrozoology is “the study of human-animal interactions and relationships” (International Society for Anthrozoology 2023). I believe that using both words—“interactions” and “relationships”—here is intentional in that it separates the fleeting from the ongoing. As I understand them from a social psychological viewpoint, relationships confer certain responsibilities and considerations. Blumstein and Kollock (1988:468) write about relationships: “In any relationship the two participants are interdependent, i.e. the behavior of each affects the outcomes of the other.” The authors further

explain that relationships are shaped by history and the promise of a future; in linear terms, interaction A impacts interaction B, which then impacts interaction C. While these definitions do not imply that all relationships are positive, they do convey a sense of mutual influence and continuity. Bearing this in mind, we can imagine the decisions we undertake as we engage in relationships. Even though many of these processes are subconscious, we act in intentional ways that affect other social beings, whether they are our dearly beloved spouse of 20 years, the neighbor whose loud music we loathe, or the cats who sit on our laps as we wind down from a long day.

As such, I believe my obligation when studying relationships between humans and other animals is to center the considerations afforded to nonhumans in equal ways to those of humans. For this dissertation, this means using the previously cited work on animal intersubjectivity as a starting point, not an end point. I assume cat personhood as foundational to my inquiry, and as my analysis has borne out that my participants do as well, this assumption positions cats as additional co-creators of this work. I situate my findings through the language and theory of human identity but consider the cat's standpoint as an agentic being to the extent possible given my own limitations (Tsing 2014).

Though some may critique this stance as anthropomorphic, I counter that anthropomorphism is not to be avoided at all costs; it is inevitable that human researchers will understand phenomena through a human lens (Irvine 2008b). While unreflective anthropomorphism may indeed be harmful to other beings in the sense that it confers expectations on them, critical anthropomorphism can be analogous to Weber's (1949) concept of *verstehen*—that is, situating oneself in another's position to understand the meanings they assign to their actions (Irvine 2004). With nonhumans, this involves using knowledge of animals'

biology, behavior, and personal past experiences with individuals of the species (Burghardt 1998), or considering “animals-as-such” (DeMello and Shapiro 2010:312). In this way, I disagree with Hurn’s (2010:27) assertion that the term “anthrozoology” implies treatment of animals as objects due to its emphasis on zoology, which she positions as a science that has “tended to strive for objective detachment from the subjects of research.” On the contrary, I believe anthrozoology researchers can, and should, use zoological scholarship as a starting point for exploring how nonhumans experience their environments, and how those experiences may translate to intersubjectivity. To me, an anthrozoological standpoint implies that animals’ worlds belong to them; we are but guests with an imperative to represent those worlds as best we can.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Qualitative methods aim to illuminate questions that cannot be easily explored with a set of pre-constructed variables. Given that this study examined identity processes, with an attendant focus on relationships and experiences, in-depth interviews were well-suited to eliciting rich data to inform the research question. In a parallel process, a constructivist grounded theory approach to analysis allowed the research to evolve as coding, memo-writing, and comparison informed my insights. Moreover, using identity as a sensitizing concept during analysis and a three-part schema to scaffold my findings aided in building a cohesive, theory-informed narrative.

Throughout the project, mindfulness of my positionality and animal-centered values enabled judicious co-creation of the following narratives. In the first of four substantive chapters, I will next present my findings regarding men who share their relationships with cats on social media.

Chapter 4 **“Sharing the Joy of Her”: Understanding the Cat Guy**

Ethan began our interview by telling me, through laughter, “I love this cat more than I love most people.” I could see the feeling was mutual, as Ethan’s cat, Dewey, jumped on his lap and began rubbing Ethan’s face and hands with his head in the characteristic way of cats. Throughout the interview, Ethan described his relationship with Dewey in emotionally demonstrative, adoring ways: devastation when recounting an incident where Dewey had temporarily escaped; elation in recalling peaceful moments spent relaxing together; delight at Dewey’s soft fur and handsome face. Though he had always loved all animals, Ethan hadn’t always felt so comfortable displaying his love for cats. He explained, “My whole thing through middle school and high school was, be tough, be manly, be masculine. It's stuff that I'm not, but stuff that I [felt] like I need[ed] to do to fit in.” Ethan believed that enthusing about cats did not fit into the traditionally masculine image he was trying to project. However, in his late teenage years, he experienced hardships with his mental health and pursued treatment for depression. As part of this process, a re-assessment of his self-concept led him to the conclusion that his priority was to shed the façade of hypermasculinity and be himself: a friendly, approachable person whose love for cats did not subtract from his likability, but enhanced it. As he mirthfully explained, “I almost feel like I'm making up for lost time for all the years that I didn't tell everyone about how much I love my cats by now kind of going overboard with it.”

Ethan’s experiences reflect societal norms that have long coded cats—and thus, those who enjoy their company—as feminine. Arluke and Rolfe (2013), in a study of photographs spanning the years 1890 to 1940, found that while women were often pictured cradling, kissing, and holding their cats close, men were generally distant from cats in photos, engaging only in

incidental contact. Exceptions occurred when men were photographed in highly masculinized settings, such as railyards or Navy ships, or were of high enough social standing that their masculine status was at little risk; for example, President Calvin Coolidge apparently liked to “wear” his cat Tiger on his shoulders (Houghton 2024). Other research on men and cats has focused on perceptions surrounding the masculinity and desirability of men who identify as cat people, explicitly or implicitly. For example, Mitchell and Ellis (2013) found that men who were described as “cat people” were perceived as less masculine, and women in Kogan and Volsche’s (2020) study ranked men with cats in their internet dating profile photos as less masculine and less datable than those pictured alone. Despite the negative portrayal of men who love cats, the internet has proven to be a fruitful space for men who wish to showcase their relationships with their feline companions. Social media sites such as Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram have allowed men to subvert—whether consciously or not—the stereotype of cats as a woman’s companion, and of themselves as feminine in presentation or self-concept. In this chapter, I detail identity transformation among 21 men who publicly reveal their relationships with their cats on social media and in their personal lives.

Overall, men reported that they view themselves as “cat guys,” which for most manifests in describing themselves as “cat dads.” This identity claim emerges through two preliminary transformations of the self: one in relationship to cats as agentic beings, and one in relation to society and, specifically, notions of masculinity. This transformation process is shaped through experiences of attunement, including mutual understanding, respecting boundaries, and engaging in reciprocity. Attunement is first shaped through everyday embodied interactions, including caregiving; affection and leisure; and men’s likening of cats’ states of being to themselves. I begin by describing the embodied experiences that men reported engaging in with their cats. I

then explain the resulting sense of attunement, and conclude with a detailed account of two identity transformations and how they shape men's concepts of themselves as fathers or father-like figures.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCES WITH CATS

Caregiving

Caregiving begins with the assumption of intersubjectivity between caregiver and recipient: "What is definitive about care. . . seems to be a perspective of taking the other's needs as the starting point for what must be done" (Tronto 1993:105). "Needs" may be a deceptive term here, as some may dismiss caring for a cat as rote activity based on obvious biological imperatives: pour food in a dish, refill the water bowl, and keep the litter box relatively clean. However, for the men in this study, caregiving extends beyond these basics to encompass responsibility; worry and protectiveness; emotional support; and involvement in health care.

For several men, their burgeoning identity as a primary caregiver served as a turning point for when they began to sense a shift in the human-cat relationship. Many reported living with cats during childhood and adolescence, but bearing only partial, if any, responsibility for the family's cat—a common arrangement wherein parents assume most caregiving duties for companion animals (Davis 1987). When these men moved away from home and began living with their own cats, a new sense of responsibility—and caregiving identity—emerged. Jordan acknowledged, "They're more my identity than my cats growing up were." Some admitted trepidation at this newfound responsibility, as did the men in Brandth and Kvande's (2018) research regarding new fathers. The men in this study, while excited for the opportunity to care for their infants, felt fearful that their caregiving would be inadequate as a result of their inexperience. Tobias explained his hesitation to adopt a cat as a result of a similar fear: "I guess I

was just scared of the responsibility more than anything of cat ownership. And then I realized it's not that big a deal." Men also described taking on responsibility for their cats' emotional contentment. Landon discussed this evolution in his intentions toward his cats: "As I've gotten older, I've gotten a little less selfish about the motivations. The motivations at first were how happy they made me. But the older I've gotten, the more I wanna make them happy." These transformations of identity mirror the changes documented by Palkovitz, Copes, and Woolfolk (2001:57), who reported that "Becoming a father may have intensified the desire to give to others rather than to solely center on oneself...men often stated that fatherhood had caused them to become more other oriented." Becoming more oriented toward another's needs is also a key feature of being-for them, evidenced here among men alongside being-with their cats in everyday interaction.

In addition to interactions in the present, men conceive of a future with their cats and accordingly contemplate how to ensure their welfare. Echoing Laurent-Simpson's (2021) findings that companion animal guardians worried about their animals' physical, emotional, and psychological health, when asked what traits of a father they embody, several men reported actively worrying about their cats' well-being and safety. Ethan explained that though Dewey had been living outdoors, "I keep him inside because coyotes exist. Cars exist. And the idea of him getting hurt brings me physical pain." Some men described their worry as manifesting in an urge to protect, and specifically to their instinct to protect vulnerable beings. Landon, tearing up, talked about the feelings he experiences when he witnesses an animal being harmed: "I guess it's a rescue drive. I want so bad to get them out of that place and hold them really tight to protect them from the vulnerability." Men also feel a sense of helplessness when learning new information about their cats' physical health. Speaking of his cat's cancer diagnosis, Ashton

reported: “When I got the news, [it] was very hard because it felt like here was something I couldn't protect him against.” Dylan talked about an unanticipated emotional response when receiving the news that his adopted cat was older than he previously thought:

It made me upset because it's like, I might have a lot less time with [cat] than I originally thought. It kind of made me wonder, too, if there was anything else I could be—or should be—doing for him.

Furthermore, men reported worrying about their cats' emotional well-being, wishing to protect them from experiencing fear or anxiety. For Julian, this manifests in a tactic used by adults to allay children's fears: “Helping her...scale down her nervousness. Like, if she sees something she's worried about, I will kind of stand between her and it and be like, ‘Look, there's nothing to be scared about.’” Similarly, Ashton recalled the first time his cat experienced a thunderstorm:

There was a lot of thunder, a lot of howling winds. I remember him lying terrified on the bed and looking at the curtains, and I was just sort of stroking him, making sure he was okay, playing with him.

This interaction resembles techniques for calming a frightened child: reassuring bodily contact, such as holding a hand or squeezing a shoulder, or attempting to distract the child through play or diverting their attention. Men's emotions, along with their actions, regarding the protection of their cats' physical and emotional well-being closely reflected those of men parenting toddlers in Kerr and colleagues' (2022) study. For these men, an inability to shield their children from negative experiences—including unforeseeable events, such as illness—indicates a perceived failure on their own part, causing stress, guilt, and sadness. These emotions also emerged when fathers imagined future hardships for their children. As revealed by their worries about the

future, desire to protect, and propensity to shoulder responsibility for unpredictable events, the men in the present study demonstrated marked alignment with men caring for human children.

In addition, worry about their cats' physical well-being leads men to play an active part in their health care. Eli, whose cat needed multiple surgeries due to gastrointestinal illness, described the experience as "traumatic." He recalled "stressful days, when she had to get her surgeries...I feel bad 'cause I don't know what's going on. I need to get her taken care of." Eli's account aligns with research indicating that approximately one-quarter to one-third of parents whose children are diagnosed with serious illnesses exhibit symptoms of acute stress disorder, including anxiety and feelings of powerlessness (Woolf et al. 2016). Men's involvement in their cats' health care strengthens the relationship in two ways. First, as a result of providing direct care, men sense greater trust from their cats. Greg reported that, "I am the one she trusts more to feed her her lysine treat for her immune system. I'm the one she trusts more to wipe her weepy eye. When we have to trim their claws, I'm the one who has to do the trimming while my wife holds her." Second, as Gabe described, the relationship grew in intimacy due to his cat's need for asthma treatments:

Twice a day, we give him an inhaler, which he's shockingly pretty good with; we have to wrap him up 'cause he gets squirmy. But it's just sort of this weird thing, 'cause here you've got this baby-sized creature that you're swaddling up in a blanket giving him medicine twice a day.

Men demonstrate investment in their cats' well-being—both emotional and physical—through daily caregiving, resulting in a close, trusting relationship. These bonds are further strengthened when men engage in affectionate and playful activities with their cats.

Affection and Leisure

Several men talked about love as being an important aspect of fatherhood and described how they and their cats express love through physical affection. In addition, they reported a sense of gratification from both giving and receiving affection, which, as Irvine (2004) points out, signals intimate knowledge of the animal. Henry, describing a cat who he brought into his home from the outdoors, and whose affection eluded him for several years, noted: “Sometimes in the morning he will literally slide up along my body and if I'm petting him just right, he'll start grooming my face, which is apparently a sign of him really caring.” This demonstrates Henry's patience and dedication to establishing mutuality in the relationship, and he expressed pride at not only working hard to merit the cat's affection, but coming to understand the cat's individuality. Tobias similarly reported “a nice little satisfaction that I've done the day correctly when she crawls into bed with me at night. It doesn't happen every night, but when it happens, I feel like I had a good day.” Men also recognized that honoring the cat's boundaries is crucial to this undertaking, and granted cats agency in determining the terms of the interaction. Drew described how people who have relationships with cats must be willing to accept rejection:

You might want to hold your cat, you might want to give them affection or get that affection back, but [if] they're not into it, if they don't want it, it's not gonna happen. You have to be okay with that.

Close relationships engender a sense of pride among men, who overwhelmingly appreciate cats' greater reluctance to give affection to strangers. Earning a cat's affection elevates men's self-worth in similar ways to the fathers in Brandth and Kvande's (2018) study, who reported a sense of accomplishment when their children accepted them as caregivers. Dylan

described this feeling as validation of parenting competently, thus confirming the parental identity:

I feel like they're also letting you in, in a sense. Like, they feel really comfortable with you if they're getting that close to you, which I think is rewarding. Especially with a cat like [my cat] who has harder boundaries...I think it kind of tells me I'm doing something right by them...it's them communicating to you, "Hey, I trust you. I like you. You're taking good care of me."

Not only does Dylan reveal validation of his skill in caring for his cats; he characterizes the relationship as producing bi-directional emotional attachment and fulfillment, another indication of parental success.

Another site of embodied attention that emerged among men and cats was play, which serves not only as an enjoyable experience, but an opportunity for bonding and learning how to connect with one another. Ashton, in recounting the games he and his cat developed, described them as demonstrations of mutual harmony: "I felt like I was really communicating with him in this way and it really built this bond. It felt like there was this understanding where we couldn't use words, but each knew what the other wanted." Irvine (2001) characterized communication during play as an act of resistance to the narrative of animals as "other," describing animal guardians' efforts to understand their companions' language as imbuing the animal with subjectivity. Play also serves as a site of enjoyment by proxy through perception of the cat's experience, as Julian observed: "I think her silliness is a joy...she brings a silliness and playfulness into our lives that reminds us we can be silly for a while and take a break."

Companion animals are commonly evoked among pet guardians as symbols of freedom and wholesomeness. This represents, according to Irvine (2001), a break from the "iron cage" (Weber

1904)—the trappings of human reasoning that beget working efficiently and uncreatively as a means to an end. That is, for many people, their non-human companions represent a reminder that life is for enjoyment, not just work. Guardians who allow themselves to encounter their companions' selves in this way open the door to further recognition of similarities between human and non-human.

Recognizing Self in Cat

Just as people are drawn to interact with other humans we understand to be similar to ourselves, we also value this trait in companion animals. Irvine (2004) described pet adopters forging connections with shelter animals they perceived as similar to themselves, giving the example of a woman who had suffered a brain injury and the magnetic pull she felt toward a cat who, like herself, had experienced physical hardship. In the present study, observation and interpretation of cats' behaviors, states of mind, and preferences translate to assignation of the cat as similar to oneself in personality and mannerisms. For example, several men noted their own more reserved natures, likening themselves to their cats in reflection of research finding that self-described preference for cats correlated with greater introversion (Gosling, Sandy, and Potter 2010; Puskey and Coy 2020). Cats' seeming indifference led Nolan to describe himself as similar to their demeanor: "Introverted... 'I like you, but... fuck off' <laugh> kind of personality." Ethan reported personal preferences that complement cats' tendency toward relaxation and selective solitude: "The joy of... being alone while also still having someone that matches that energy with you."

Some may portray these examples as self-selection into pet companionship that harmonizes with pre-existing individual preferences. For example, if I wish to adopt a dog who is quiet and content to lounge on the couch, a young beagle may not be the best choice; in

adopting an older basset hound instead, I am selecting a companion with the traits I seek. However, I argue that even though my participants chose to live with cats due to some of their innate characteristics, recognition of—and more importantly, *honoring*—individual cats’ personalities and preferences transcends simple lifestyle choices. That is, similar to the dog guardians in Sanders’ (1993) study, recognition of individuality takes precedence over breed—or in the present study, species—traits. I may believe my older basset hound will be an ideal couch companion; however, only through living with the dog on a day-to-day basis will I come to recognize and appreciate her idiosyncrasies. Similarly, though cats may exhibit greater independence as a species, individual cats prefer different levels of interaction with humans at different times as the relationship and its constituent parties evolve.

By recognizing their cats’ distinct inclinations, men regard these beings as minded individuals, creating the expectation of a relationship centered on intersubjectivity and knowledge of mind through interaction. For instance, Irvine (2004) provides examples of humans and their companion animals interacting on the basis of shared emotion. She writes about a normally calm and reserved woman’s audible agitation arising from frustration at her insurance company. Her cat, sensing his guardian’s distress, approached her, sniffing her face and placing his paw on her arm. The woman responded by petting the cat and, sufficiently reassured by her touch, he retreated to his lounging spot. These interactions, Irvine (2004:148) contends, are “important in the mutual creation of selfhood. By interpreting the content of other minds...we develop a sense of self-in-relation.” Drew demonstrated this through connection with his cat’s emotional well-being. Recognizing his cat’s anxiety led Drew to compare her struggles with his own, translating to feelings of empathy and solidarity:

I have very severe anxiety and depression and that cat has severe anxiety. And that's a similarity, but also something where it's like, no, I get it. I understand her. Like, I don't know what's going on in that brain, but I understand the type of feeling she's having.

Through close interaction, men are able to develop a sense of intimate knowledge exchanged between themselves and their cats. The resulting attunement with another being manifested in men better understanding their cats' preferences for interaction and engaging in reciprocity in the relationship.

ATTUNEMENT

Understanding Preferences for Interaction

Embodied experiences of observation and caregiving led to cat guys better understanding their companions' preferences. Just as Brandth and Kvande (2018) reported among fathers of toddlers, the men in the present study reported satisfaction at being able to participate effectively in interaction as a result of bi-directional communication. Levi described himself as not only understanding cats' needs and preferences, but demonstrating this trait in his demeanor toward them: "I feel I can read them...I can get a sense of whether or not they want to be approached...I think I give that vibe off to them as well." Levi's insinuation here is that, in considering their desire to be approached (or not), he signals to cats that he will respect their autonomy in an ongoing dance of perception. While Levi spoke of his attention to cats' agency in general, cat guardians grant similar deference to individual biographies and inclinations, reflecting their tendency to create human-like identities for their companion animals (Austin and Irvine 2020; Sanders 1993; Taylor 2007). For example, the guardians described by Alger and Alger (1997) cited examples from their cats' histories—for example, of abuse—to understand the animal's

reluctance to engage. Some men gave specific examples of how their cats “speak” their preferences for interaction, and how they learned to interpret these communications over the course of the relationship. Ethan talked about a seemingly obvious signal of wanting to be left alone from his cat:

He has days where he doesn't want to be touched. I'll go over and I'll start to pet him, and the claws will come out almost immediately. And it's like, “Okay, cool. I'm gonna go work at my computer. And when you're feeling better, you come find me.”

However, despite signals that may seem obvious, Ethan further described friends who have warned him against trying to interact with their cat, indicating that the cat is “mean” or dangerous. He rejected this idea, explaining that “The cat doesn't want to be mean. I think it's a matter of the family hasn't respected the cat's boundaries and she feels like she has to defend herself.” Several other men raised the idea of respecting boundaries as an aspect of their selves that emerged in relation to bonding with cats.

In accordance with earning cats’ trust, respecting their agency, and honoring their individuality, men portrayed respecting cats’ boundaries as a result of bodily conversations occurring over time. Gabe described his behavioral shift from childhood to young adulthood as a process of learning how trying to force affection induced dissatisfaction in his family’s cats:

I picked them up whether they wanted to or not. They hissed at me a good bit. I absolutely did things that deserved that. And I noticed that...the next pair of kittens that my parents got when I was 17, it was a lot different; I let them come to me. I let them have their own space and watched their own personalities develop.

Dylan expressed disbelief that people could not—or were unwilling to—link their own behavior with cats’ reactions: “Everyone seems to have a bad experience story about some cat that scratched them for no reason. And it's like, well, maybe they scratched you for a reason, you know?” This incredulity indicates a belief that people who characterize cats as lashing out unprovoked are simply ignorant of—or unwilling to listen to—cats’ communicative signals, focusing instead on their own desires for interaction.

Reciprocity

Though not solely the domain of caregiving relationships, reciprocity is a key feature of these connections (Elliott 2016). That is, relationships are not static and unidirectional; rather, they are fluid, with each party serving as both dependent and provider in different ways over time. The case of men and cats is especially germane to reciprocity in familial relationships, where it is not only a feature of sustained interaction across the life course, but often involves exchange of nonphysical supports due to differential access to material goods (Horwitz, Reinhard, and Howell-White 1996). Men in this study acknowledged the intangible, interactional resources flowing between themselves and their cats, characterizing the relationship as mutually beneficial. Ethan talked about love given and received, physically on the cat’s part and verbally on his own:

It's safe to say that the love that he is showing is him reciprocating what he's been getting, because I tell this cat that he is a handsome boy and I love him at least a hundred times every day. And I have every day since I've gotten him.

In addition, men reported that their cats were happy to see them after periods of absence. Tobias noted that he was eager to see his cat upon returning home from work, and she returned the sentiment:

She's right there meeting me, doing a thing where she rubs on the ground and meows at me and greets me...it made me feel great that I was coming home to something <laugh> and I had this little baby that I was taking care of.

As noted in discussion of embodied interactions, men reported acting as emotional support for their cats, and they perceived their cats as returning emotional support. In a reflection of findings from Sanders (1993) and Alger and Alger (1997) reflecting that guardians perceive empathy and care from their companion animals in times of emotional hardship, Ethan noted, "During high school, events transpired that resulted in me developing severe depression, and having a cat around...really helped with that over the years."

Attunement to another creature's emotional and physical energy, needs, and agency set the stage for transformation of men's identity in relation to their cats. Transformation to thinking of oneself as a father to a cat logically follows when defining the cat as a child. Identities thus become intertwined, as in this dyadic relationship, one cannot exist without the other. In this study, these new identities emerged in two core products of the cat's subjective co-creation: the relationship between man as father and cat as child, and the shared living space.

PERSONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: INTERTWINED SELVES

Co-Creation of Relationship

Many men in this study referred to their cats as sons and daughters, and observed in them the same developmental processes that human children undergo. A key element of growth in the father-child relationship related to learning the individual cat's preferences and shifting one's behavior accordingly. Henry noted,

I've come to both appreciate cats as individuals and then learn how to communicate with them in their individual way...I understand that each cat is

different. Each cat needs a different set of [stimuli], each cat his or her own space in his or her own way.

In the same way that many parents note connecting with their child once the child's personality starts to emerge, Jacob noted that he does the same: "I connect to them, 'cause each and every cat has his own character."

The embodied experiences that lead to this transformation also constitute relationship co-creation, as described above. In alignment with recognizing and honoring cats' agency, men assumed the reverse was also true, and interpreted their cats' actions as seeking to build the relationship through intentional behavior. For example, Ethan described Dewey's efforts to direct attention away from work: "He doesn't really like it when I'm at my computer. He'll sit here, meowing, like, 'Dad, Dad, you're home. You have hands. Give me attention.'" Drew described himself and his cat as having similar love languages, or modes of demonstrating affection: "I'm a very quality time, affection-based person. That's a love language. And I think that's his love language...spending time together, holding hands or something like that, it's important." As in any human-human relationship, each human-cat relationship transforms over time as a result of these exchanges, each participant learning the other's ways of being and relating—and, importantly, shifting their own behavior accordingly. Maurstad, Davis, and Cowles (2013:328) write about horseback riding:

Riders are reading the particular horse for character, and dealing with it on its own terms. This relational engagement affects behaviour in ways that change over time, as one gets to know the individual. One learns about one's own actions; that is one's communicative skills and statements, as they become reflected in the other.

In a similar way, men and cats co-create their relationship through close interaction and attunement. Absent the substantial bodily peril of ignoring a horse's communicative cues, the motivation among my participants seems to be one of granting agency to forge genuine connection.

Co-Creation of Living Space

Along with co-creation of the intangible aspects of the relationship, men noted their cats' roles in shaping the physical living space. As Ashton noted, "He is an active subject or agent in his own right, so I don't have total control over the place, which I kind of like." Granting his cat control implies that Ashton takes his cat's needs and desires into account when considering living arrangements or changes to the space. Irvine and Cilia (2017:5) attribute this latitude to cats' "kinship status," observing that companion animals are now permitted to enter areas of the home previously available to human family members only. Franklin (2006) provides the example of bedrooms, areas that still connote selective access to one's intimates. Of note, several men in this study completed their interviews in bedrooms, turning the camera to show me their cat companions sprawled out on beds.

On a more quotidian level, by granting his cat subjectivity, Ashton is stating that how his cat lives alongside him—the cat's choices, needs, and behaviors—shape his life in ways that amount to intentionality rather than simple co-existence in a location. Taking these preferences into account is evident in the ways that people construct a living environment suitable to cats' innate behaviors. For example, many guardians install vertical cat trees to accommodate felines' inclination to survey their territory from above, or construct "catios," enclosures that allow cats to explore the outdoors, but constrain their roaming and provide protection from predators. Franklin (2006:148) points out that this is "widely considered as pampering and kitsch."

However, he challenges this viewpoint as narrow, pointing out that human conceit often has little to do with these accommodations: “Much of what changes is done in relation to/in combination with what the animals do, prefer, enact. Much of it is or begins with non-human agency.”

Intangible aspects of living space also emerged as considerations for how men perceived the felines who live in their homes. Interaction, observation, and the daily rituals of living with another being—human or otherwise—create a tapestry of moments, most of which are not extraordinary, but all of which direct behavior toward others. For many men, these moments provide blueprints for their daily lives. Tobias noted that having a cat “gives you a level of expectations throughout your day.” Cats also serve as mediators for everyday connection between human family members, injecting a sense of presence without which the home feels incomplete. Greg characterized his cats as a touchstone for interaction with his wife, stating that “They’re just such an integral part of our home and our relationship.”

In addition to being part of human-to-human relationships, many interviewees reported that the steady presence of a cat in their home serves as a source of comfort, companionship, happiness, and consistency. Joel reported that the presence of another being filled him with a sense of wonder: “[It was] just the two of us for several months in my condo. And it was really nice. Sometimes I’d...look over and [think], ‘Wow, there’s this little being here with me.’” Even if interactions are scarce, the sense of another being’s presence is a source of companionship; as Joel continued, “Having a cat around, even if it’s not a love bug...having it around year in, year out, just adds something. You’re not nearly as lonely. You don’t feel that loneliness. You really don’t.” Nathan noted that, similar to having a human companion nearby, his cat’s presence injects an ineffable vitality into the household: “It’s comforting, even if she’s not in the room, that I can feel her presence, that I can feel some of her energy.”

In accordance with recognizing the comforting presence of another being in their homes, men reported the loss of a companion cat as very painful. Nolan eloquently spoke of the difficulty of a cat's death, identifying it as an inversion of the customary order of loss in a parent-child relationship. Alluding to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Nolan said:

Elves are very, very long-lived compared to humans...an elf falling in love with a human and knowing that they're gonna watch them grow old and die...but they're willing to pay that price of loving someone so completely that knowing...they are gonna leave before you, knowing how much it's gonna hurt and doing it anyway. And that's how I view my relationship with cats...the species that lives longer has to bear the grief of generations of loved ones that they've shepherded all the way through life, which is an unnatural part of parenting.

In recognizing that this relationship is different from parenting human children in the responsibilities surrounding end-of-life and death, Nolan is forced to engage with the cat's alterity—its inherent “otherness”—and adjust the expectations of the relationship to account for this eventual emotional hardship. Even for individuals who do not regard their cats as children, a cat's death rearranges the household in ways that change everyday life. Nathan recounted the loss of a beloved cat: “It was difficult in the gap. It was like something was missing, ‘cause it becomes such a huge part of your life.”

These accounts demonstrate a shift in men's understandings of their own identities as a function of relating to their cats. In addition to men's inner understandings of self, men also experienced transformation of their selves in relation to society. These outward-facing effects of the human-cat relationship manifest in two ways: centering the cat in other human relationships,

and embracing a model of “the new father” in a challenge to traditional ideas of fatherhood and masculinity.

SOCIAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: FORMULATING FAMILY AND FATHERHOOD

Centering the Cat in Other Human Relationships

One of the key ways men position cats as part of their identities is through centering the cat in relationships with other people. This allows men to employ three identity strategies: outwardly assigning the cat a child identity; defining the terms of a partnership in relation to the cat; and positioning the cat as a significant actor in interaction with others.

Assignment of a Child Identity. Use of verbal signifiers such as son/boy, daughter/girl, baby, and child is one way that interviewees identified the father-child relationship between man and cat. Julian explained that he and his wife “definitely see our cat as our child. And we say that explicitly, we say that often.” Men reported other behaviors that have analogues in parenting human children, as well. For example, many compared showing pictures of their cats to parents sharing pictures of their children. Ethan claimed, “People will take any opportunity they get to show me pictures of their newborn, and I'm no different.” In a reflection of parent-child attachment, Nolan explained that he and his husband, when away from their cats for any length of time, are anxious to return to them: “When we go away, halfway through whatever nice vacation, we're kind of ready to get back home to the cats. Not to [city], not to the house, not to our things, not to our own bed, but the cats.” Celebrating human rituals also takes on new meaning for guardians of non-humans. Observing events such as holidays and birthdays is a significant part of family life for many Americans. In accordance with children’s participation in these celebrations, those who view their companion animals as children facilitate their involvement by, for example, purchasing gifts and preparing special meals for them (Blouin

2013; Carlisle-Frank and Frank 2006). Tobias, whose cat is black, described a new desire to participate in Halloween: “I never was a big Halloween person, but boy oh boy, does she get me in the spirit <laugh>. I get pictures of her by a pumpkin I carved.” This shift toward participating in Halloween activities indicates that Tobias derives satisfaction from observing rituals with his cat in similar ways to parents, who likewise document and share memories from the event with others.

Defining Partnerships. Several men in this study noted that they would not be compatible with a potential romantic partner unless the person also liked—or at least could live with—cats. Given the choice, men prioritize cat companionship; as Jordan remarked, “If it came down to the cats or a partner, it would be the cats.” Jordan’s strong assertion reflects the experiences of several participants in Laurent-Simpson’s (2021) research, who described relationships that ended due to the partner’s incompatibility with their companion animals. Some men in the present study go so far as to note this requirement in their profiles on internet dating sites. Gabe volunteered, “On my dating profiles, I’ve led with [being a cat person] because I would realistically probably not be compatible with someone who hated cats or was too allergic to have them.” Such an approach challenges research by Kogan and Volsche (2020), who found that men pictured with a cat on their internet dating profiles were considered less datable than those who appeared alone. When told about this research, several men reported that they had experienced just the opposite; Ashton remarked, “I’ve had people cold approach me...because of my cat...I found that it definitely brings people in rather than anything else.” Men who were partnered discussed the relationships not only between themselves and their cats, but the relationships between their partners and their cats. Parker joked, “I’m like, ‘Sorry, babe. You’re gonna have to be number two. My cat’s my priority right now.’ She plays along.” This tendency to look to the

future and prioritize tolerance—if not affinity—for cats as an essential quality in a romantic partner indicates that these men consider cat companionship to be an essential part of their lives and identities. Willingness to reject a potential partner on the basis of a cat allergy demonstrates the fundamental role these animals play in these men’s familial structure.

Positioning Cats as Social Actors. In much the same way as children provide parents with a foundational aspect of identity to discuss with others, cats play this role in men’s lives. In addition, men elicit confirmation of the parent identity through interaction with friends and family members, much as in Laurent-Simpson’s (2017a; 2017b) research, where participants’ parents embracing the grandparent identity reinforced their own commitment to the parent identity. In a reflection of these findings, Mateo reported that his mother confirms his identity as a cat father by referring to his cat as a grandchild: “She calls her her granddaughter and she always checks in on her granddaughter.” Other participants similarly reported friends and family members regularly checking in on their cats in the course of conversation, as they would a human child. Cats are additionally part of phone calls, texts, and video calls, just as a human child would be. Greg noted, “We have Zooms with our families, so we’ll show them when the cat’s sleeping between us.”

Family and close friends are not the only relationships through which these identities emerge. Just as some people share pictures of their children to connect with co-workers, cats too play a role in facilitating social ties. Henry shared that his cats are regularly part of work-related Zoom calls: “So, if there’s a tail swishing in front of the camera, it’s like, ‘oh, which one of your cats is on your lap this time?’” Mateo, who works in sales, shows pictures of his cat to potential clients: “At work I’ll show her to prospects and to people that I’m selling to and they’ll love it.” Similarly, three men in this study reported using their cat person identity as a point of connection

with their students. Jordan reflected, “I’ve liked it as a way to humanize me...I’m not just this walking physics book. I’m a human being outside and I have interests and I might have the same interests as some of you.” By positioning cats as a vital part of their lives, men communicate to others the central role that these relationships play in their home, family structures, and concept of self. Furthermore, men’s self-concepts are reinforced through their resistance to traditional and harmful ideas of masculinity and fatherhood. Through forging caring, emotive relationships with cats—an animal conventionally coded as feminine—my participants challenge the status quo of hegemonic masculinity.

Embracing Fatherhood and Redefining Masculinity

In enacting the role of a father with cats, men perform actions that signify traditional ideas of a father. Indeed, men consider providing for and protecting their cats important aspects of their concepts of fatherhood. However, in other manifestations of the father-child relationship, men reject Tronto’s (2013) assertion that serving as providers and protectors allows men to practice caregiving in more distant ways. Rather, men embrace a positionality embodying “the new father” as described by Andreasson and Johansson (2016:489), an emerging model that rejects the notion of distance between fathers and children and adopts a concept of fatherhood characterized by displays of care, affect, and intimacy. The actions that men take to redefine masculinity align with the concept of caring masculinities, which “recast traditional masculine values like protection and providing into relational, interdependent, care-oriented ones” (Elliott 2016:253). In adopting a caring masculinity identity, men engaged in redefining and “redoing” masculinity (Scheibling 2020:8).

Elliott (2016:246) points out that even though hegemonic masculinity as a concept is not all-encompassing in terms of men’s experiences, its permeation in society may yet influence men

as they negotiate their identities and behavior. Furthermore, flouting social expectations can result in exclusion and reduced access to privileges traditionally afforded to men. However, much like the men in Scheibling's (2020:15) study of fatherhood, the men in this study "while not renouncing their identities and status as men, most...are outspokenly critical of beliefs, behaviors, and representations that espouse male hegemony." Several men spoke of the deleterious effects of "toxic masculinity." Ethan undertook a mostly tolerant attitude, adding a note of caution: "There's different forms of masculinity and if you want to be seen as traditionally masculine, you go ahead; you do that. The problem comes when you start to be toxic about it." He further described the men who engage in toxicity as bullies, unapproachable, and inducing discomfort in others. Other men decried specific aspects of toxic masculinity that engender harm. For example, Ashton registered his disgust with the antagonistic aspects of masculinity: "It makes me uncomfortable when that's happening, that whole competitiveness of, 'I'm stronger, I can drink more beer, I can shoot more animals, and I drive a bigger truck.' It's always struck me as kind of pathetic." Julian rebuffed the idea that softness implies a failing:

Toxic masculinity as a concept is defined by this idea that you have to be tough, you have to be thick-skinned...softness is somehow considered a weakness even though...an octopus can fit through a hole the size of a quarter. There's barely any part of its body that's hard, and it's incredibly durable and strong.

Almost unanimously, the men in this study reported that aligning with ideals traditionally viewed as masculine was unimportant or even unattractive to them. However, they did not reject the idea of themselves as essentially masculine. Rather, they redefined masculinity for themselves through descriptions of their ideal selves and through actions with their cats in accordance with Marsiglio and Roy's (2012:161) assertion that "fathers are actively building alternative

masculinities in contrast to more traditional notions of the emotionally detached, breadwinner-focused image of masculinity and fatherhood.”

Scheibling (2020) reported that the men in his study recast the term “masculinity” as encompassing care, mutual exchange, and candid demonstration of emotion. In the present study, men also elaborated on their ideas of what masculinity should entail. For instance, Mateo redefined masculinity in terms of duty to others:

It’s more defined by, are you reliable? Are you consistent? Do you have integrity? Do you meet your obligations and your responsibilities? Do you look after your family? Do you treat your friends and acquaintances and people that depend on you with respect, and are you serving as a good example?

Landon similarly discussed masculinity in terms of treating others well and with a sense of honor: “I do worry about being perceived as a gentleman, as somebody who does the right thing.”

Men likewise sought to reclaim characteristics traditionally cast as feminine. Cal decried society’s tendency to assign empathy as a feminine trait, opining that doing so acts “much to our detriment.” As part of the transformation process described in this chapter’s introduction, Ethan talked about his sense of self shifting from a person who tried to explicitly conform with masculine norms by being involved in sports to one who accepted the giddy feelings brought on by adorable animals: “I started to really figure out who I was and I was like, ‘Oh, it’s cool that I’m a large dude that likes cute, soft things.’” Similarly, men eschewed the idea that showing affection to others is a feminine action, associating the tendency to remain at a distance with harmful ideals of masculinity. This reclamation is in accord with Andreassonn and Johansson’s

(2016:489) thesis of new fatherhood entailing “intimacy and close contact between fathers and children.” Mateo noted,

Affection and masculinity being delineated is also a false dichotomy because I think part of the opposite of toxic masculinity is being masculine in a way that means you can show affection, not turning a cold shoulder to your girlfriend or to your kids because that's more manly.

In fact, through posting on social media, men aim to highlight the close relationship between themselves and their cat. Doing so serves as a confirmation of the cat dad identity, according to Nolan: “People who know cats well and know me well enough, they tend to give me affirmation that I'm a good cat dad because of the look of adoration and ease that the cats have.” Sharing this relationship also allows men to share the everyday entanglements of life with a cat who they spend time caring for and whose presence co-constitutes their household. In processes strikingly similar to parents who share their children’s activities and photos, men share these photos and videos to evoke similar feelings of happiness in others. Mateo remarked, “I had all these moments with her that only I had, which is fine—I cherish those moments anyway—but I felt that others would enjoy them too.” Julian further elaborated on the desire to create a sense of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1912): “I like to share it when she's doing something cute or funny or silly or whatever the case is. I just wanna share with people and have them experience what I'm experiencing with me.” Others noted a wish to share induced by a feeling similar to overwhelm at how cute their cat is. Gabe remarked, laughing: “I think I have the cutest cat and I'm going to post him here until you agree.” Pride—in the cat rather than the self—also played a part in sharing photos on social media. Parker noted, “I wanna show off something that I'm very proud of. Something that I love.”

Through redefining masculine actions and qualities, embracing an identity of caring masculinity, and actively sharing their relationship with their cats on social media, men resist societal boundaries that traditionally have limited their public interaction with cats. These acts of resistance are strikingly similar to those employed by vegan men, who are often stereotyped as feminine (Greenebaum and Dexter 2018). Both groups of men reject key ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as dismissing care and compassion as feminine and desiring to dominate nonhumans. On the contrary, the men in this study overwhelmingly characterized cats' independence and reluctance to grant immediate trust as endearing qualities.

In addition to challenging ideas about the propriety of men's close relationships with an animal coded as feminine, these enactments of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014) challenge outdated ideas about fatherhood, and indeed, about masculinity itself. For some men, this is a latent benefit of their relationships with cats, one that operates in the background of daily life and emerges quietly. For others, defying the stigma associated with harmful ideas of manhood is a more outward project that serves as a confirmation for the type of masculinity they wish to embody. Julian explained this stance:

It's not that I don't care about it. In fact, I'm actively trying to push back against that whenever I get a chance to...And I think maybe that's some part of my journey of posting pictures, of having a cat...to show that, hey, dudes can have cats and have love for cats and all that kind of stuff too, and it's cool. The more you see examples of this stuff, the more normative it becomes.

Julian—in alignment with all participants in this group—rejected the notion that being a cat guardian is in any way associated with gender or sexuality. While many participants remarked that they hadn't considered the implications of publicly sharing their relationships with cats,

others openly defy stereotypical expectations. In doing so, these men aim to challenge ideas that degrade not only men, but women and cats, as well.

CONCLUSION

Dutton's (2012:99) concept of "shared somatic awareness" is evident in the ways that men interact bodily with their cats in four main ways. First, acts of hands-on caregiving serve as sites of intimacy and trust-building between men and their cats. Most, but not all, men in this study characterized their positionality to their cats as a father-child relationship—an interesting outcome in contrast to research from Ramirez (2006) finding that men did not refer to themselves as "dog dads." However, even the men who used non-paternal language to describe the man-cat relationship performed embodied interactions characteristic of being-with and being-for in similar ways to fatherhood, as exemplified by Henry's assertion that, "We are a family, together." Regardless of the exact terminology used to describe the relationship, men reported that caregiving imbues them with a greater sense of responsibility for another being. Most notably among new cat guardians, an emergent caregiver identity signaled a shift in the cat's status as a vulnerable being for whom men are wholly accountable. Several clarified that this responsibility includes not only their cat's basic physical needs—including protection from unsafe environments and direct involvement in health care—but their contentment as well. Ensuring cats' emotional well-being includes bodily reassuring techniques, such as physical shielding and soothing contact, to ward off fear and anxiety. Second, men reported shared affection between themselves and their cats as important bonding activities. Furthermore, both giving and receiving affection results in gratification among men due to cats' greater reluctance to trust relative to dogs, the primary model of American animal companionship. Being "allowed" to engage in affectionate contact with their cats, as well as receiving affection back, engenders

men with a sense of pride in “doing something right” in the relationship. Alongside this satisfaction, however, men also recognize the importance of honoring a cat’s preferences, endowing the cat with agency to dictate the terms of physical contact.

Men also engage in physical activity with their cats through play, an inherently intersubjective act (Irvine 2004) that further reveals men’s intentions to establish ritual and scaffold attunement. Play also serves as a symbolic resource for men when they recognize the joy their cat takes from the activity and incorporate it into their own experiences. Lastly, and relatedly, through observation of their cats’ various states of being, men recognize themselves in their cats. Most often, this takes the form of comparing themselves to their cats’ personalities, recognizing a kindred spirit in, for example, introversion. For some men, this recognition produces a greater sense of empathy for and solidarity with their cats when they sense the cat’s experience of emotional difficulties such as anxiety.

These embodied experiences lead men to greater awareness of their cats’ bodily gestures and, consequently, better understanding of intent and two-way communication. In a reflection of the pride experienced when understanding their cats’ tolerance for affection, men similarly feel satisfaction in being able to understand other body language that signals cats’ intentions and preferences. Furthermore, men reported that this knowledge informs their demeanor toward cats overall, influencing their approach to interacting in a non-threatening and respectful manner. Several participants described developing this understanding with cats over time, gaining important knowledge through cats’ bodily responses. This results in a greater ability to put their own desires for interaction aside and center the cat’s comfort and boundaries. In addition, men perceive that their intentions are returned, and that cats reciprocate the emotional and physical

care they receive. Participants reported receiving love from their cats, as well as a sense of being missed and provision of emotional support.

This consistent presence affords cats personhood as not only a being who lives in the home, but one who actively co-creates the living space alongside co-creating the man-cat relationship. The relationship and the living space coalesce to inform a shift in identity for men as they negotiate their selves in relation to a being to whom they consistently assign agency and intentionality. Participants granted their cats a co-equal role in creating the relationship, first, by assigning them the role of an autonomous child whose self emerges in much the same way as a human child develops personality, preferences, and behaviors. In addition, men assign cats an active role in relationship-building through participation in activities such as demonstrating affection, engaging in play, and soliciting attention. Cats additionally co-create the living space by serving as a symbolic resource for contentment, energy, and stability. They shape men's lives as family members whose needs must be taken into account when household changes occur.

Given the importance of cats to men's lives, a shift in identity in relation to society also emerges, through which men actively assert their status as "cat guys" in two key ways. First, they center the cat in their relationships through multiple means. In interactions with others, they assign the cat a child identity through verbal signifiers, referring to them as their sons and daughters. In addition, they are eager to show pictures or videos of their cats to others in a reflection of parents who share photos of their children, either as part of a planned effort—such as a Zoom call—or spontaneously. These mementos are shared not only with family members, but with friends, co-workers, clients, students, and even those with whom men are only slightly acquainted. In addition to co-creating the living space, cats additionally shape men's futures by

dictating the terms of romantic partnerships, demonstrating their fundamental role in the family structure.

Second, men's identities surrounding traditional ideas of masculinity and fatherhood also experience a shift. Nearly all participants reported that being seen as traditionally masculine was not important to them, and those who stated that masculinity was important to their self-concept cast their ideas of masculinity as encompassing traits that connote care for others. While not renouncing their identities as men, participants universally displayed disdain for "toxic" forms of masculinity—including those that denigrate supposedly feminine traits, which they sought to reclaim for themselves. As part of this effort, men share their lives with their cats on social media, which serves to confirm their cat dad identities and confer a sense of pride. In addition, sharing the intimacies of their lives with cats provides men with a chance to share the joy of their relationships with their cats in an effort to bring happiness to others. In parallel with redoing masculinity, men seek to redefine fatherhood, embracing the model of the "new father," one who is caring and involved rather than distant. While participants did value their role in providing for and protecting their cats, they also embraced hands-on physical and emotional care.

Men's relationships with their companion cats serve as important foundations upon which notions of home, family, and daily ritual rest. For most of my participants, these bonds evoke the father-child relationship—if not in name, definitely in action. This is most evident in the ways that men conceive of themselves as loving caregivers who wish to nurture well-being, both physical and emotional, in their cats. In the next of my four findings chapters, I will discuss a group with similar aims, whose care extends from the cats they live with to those they work with and, ultimately, the species as a whole: feline veterinarians.

Chapter 5 “I Didn’t Think I Could Love Them More”: Feline Veterinarians and Cats

I bonded with Dr. O’Malley over cat tattoos, known as “cattoos” among ink enthusiasts. She showed me the beginning of her full-arm sleeve, which currently consists of two memorial tattoos for cats who have passed on, but to which she will add more over time. Due to the impossibility of contorting my leg into a position viewable over Zoom, I emailed her pictures of my cattos commemorating three beloved cats after the interview. “I’ve been a cat lady since birth” was the first thing Dr. O’Malley said to me after our interview began, and the commitment of permanent ink to her body proved it.

Of course, other things proved it as well. After veterinary school, Dr. O’Malley worked with both large and small animals in a rural area, then moved to a practice where she treated dogs and cats. However, she was not professionally gratified, though she “tried to hoard all the cats possible” during the workday. Noting that “most vets are not cat people,” Dr. O’Malley described her empathy for the cats who seemed to be at best secondary considerations and at worst actively mistreated. Her current fulfillment became evident as she joyfully described moving to a feline-only practice: “It was glorious. Everybody wants to be there. Everybody working there loves cats and understands them.” The attachment she feels to cats, she maintains, has its downsides. She cannot be as emotionally detached when working with cats, and emotional involvement translates into greater stress outside of work. But working with dogs and cats would not be compatible with her identity; it would not be compatible with *being* Dr. O’Malley: “I would be more objective and a happier person if I did dogs, but that doesn’t fit my soul.”

Identity among veterinarians has become a recent topic of interest in sociopsychological study, likely spurred by concerns surrounding this population's mental health. Previous literature has focused on the defining motivations, attributes, and abilities of veterinarians (Armitage-Chan 2020; Armitage-Chan, Maddison, and May 2016; Armitage-Chan and May 2018; Cake et al. 2020; Page-Jones and Abbey 2015). However, no research has specifically examined identity work among veterinarians who exclusively work with particular species or types of animals—for example, avian veterinarians or those who work in zoos—nor the influences of these animals on identity. In this chapter, I detail identity transformation among feline-only veterinarians, drawing from 20 narratives of practitioners across the United States.

Feline veterinarians, through their experiences both personal and professional, experience two transformations of the self-concept. The first surfaces in relationship to cats as beings with agency and autonomy. The second positions feline-only veterinarians as distinctive from other veterinarians, the veterinary industry, and society. These identity shifts emerge as a result of attunement with cats, including reading behavior and paying attention to communication, which then allows veterinarians to build trust, alleviate stress, validate professional identity, and develop intuition about their feline patients. Furthermore, similar to the men discussed in Chapter 4, vets feel a reciprocal relationship between themselves and cats. Veterinarians achieve attunement through the embodied interactions of veterinary caregiving, which involves empathy for cats and bonding through hands-on nurturing, as well as seeing themselves as similar to cats' personalities. In what follows, I begin by detailing the embodied experiences that feline veterinarians described, leading to an account of the attunement they experience as a result. My discussion concludes with consideration of two identity transformations feline vets undergo as they build relationships with their patients and their own cats.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCES WITH CATS

Caregiving

Almost all feline-only veterinarians I spoke with reported having worked in small animal practice—that is, clinics that treat cats, dogs, rabbits, and sometimes other small mammals—prior to entering feline-only practice. For many, this experience catalyzed them to seek out work at a feline-only practice, while others entered feline medicine by happenstance. While interviewees unanimously reported a gap between dog care and cat care, those who worked in small animal practice reported personally witnessing how cats' care needs were secondary at best, resulting in these individuals feeling compassion and empathy toward cats based on their bodily communications.

Empathy. Veterinary empathy—understood by Schoenfeld-Tacher and colleagues (2017:63) as encompassing emotional, ethical, intellectual, and interactive orientations to “experienc[ing] patients’ or clients’ emotions and perspectives”—toward patients is not well studied. Most research on veterinary empathy centers on interactions with clients (see, for example, McArthur and Fitzgerald 2013; Morris 2012; Yelland and Whittlestone 2022). Some studies have found that veterinary students’ empathy toward animals wanes as their education progresses (Paul and Podberscek 2000; Schoenfeld-Tacher et al. 2015), while others discovered that most veterinary students do not experience a decline in concern for animal suffering during their education (Herzog, Vore, and New 1989). However, research about empathy toward animals in other populations can be instructive for the purposes of this study. Hills (1993) found that as instrumental views of animals—that is, views that imagine animals in terms of their use value to humans—decreased, empathy toward animals increased. Similarly, Apostol, Rebeaga, and Miclea (2013) discovered that those with greater belief in animals’ capacity for thought and

emotion feel more empathy toward them. While these findings gain greater significance in later discussions of veterinarians' relationships with the cats under their care and their views of cats as agentic subjects, the vets in this study expressed abundant empathy toward their patients.

Feline vets reported feeling compassion due to cats' fear reactions at small animal clinics. Dr. Rocha reported, "I just got tired of cats being so terrified going to the vet. And there are dogs barking, there are all these strange people handling them, it smells like dogs...I thought they deserved their own place." Most domestic cats do not leave their homes often, and when they do, their body language indicates fear at the sights, smells, and sounds of a veterinary clinic. As Dr. Taggart noted, "I can't blame them. It's not who they are." Dr. Monday elaborated on this notion, expressing the admiration she has for cats who, despite their fear and vulnerability, get through the stressful experience with her help:

There's all these other cat smells and people, they're shoved in this little carrier and they're put in this moving car with all these strange noises...and then I ask them to let me open their mouths and look in their eyes and their ears and put my hands all up on their stomach and in their anal glands. And then we need to draw blood, so we lay them on their side and pull their leg out and put pressure on it and pick them and they handle it; they do it. We ask so much of them, and they do it. Getting to share that with them, helping to keep them calm and working through it so they can be healthy...that definitely gets me in the door.

Here, Dr. Monday marvels at the cat's ability to transcend its fearful nature, recognizing that the bodily experiences she is "asking" them to participate in are unnatural, uncomfortable, and sometimes painful. By noting that veterinarians "ask so much" of their patients, and by referring to visits as shared experiences, Dr. Monday seems to be inhabiting the patient's experience

through imagining herself in an analogous situation. Such practices of bodily empathy are directly encouraged by Anseeuw and colleagues (2006:86), who urge veterinarians to place themselves in the feline mindset:

Think of how you would feel if you were shoved into a cage, taken for a frightening ride, pulled or dumped out of the carrier in a strange place, and handled in uncomfortable and undignified postures by strangers...Develop some empathy.

By encouraging veterinarians to imagine cats' distress in the veterinary clinic, the author implies that this exercise will stimulate feelings of compassion drawn from their own bodily experiences of fear.

Another empathy-eliciting scenario occurred when some veterinarians witnessed cats being handled in ways that were antithetical to humane treatment at best; at worst, some witnessed intentional cruelty. On one end of the spectrum, Dr. Vanover reported that "[Other veterinary professionals] never paid as much attention to the cats and what their needs were and how to treat them properly." This sometimes resulted in veterinarians' verbal assertions that cats were deliberately hostile. In much the same way that several men expressed incredulity that people are unwilling to turn their attention to, first, their own behavior, and second, the cat's innate disposition, Dr. Limon felt indignation at this unfair characterization: "A cat would be anxious and upset and hard to handle, and people would be like, 'I don't know how someone could have this cat in their household. This is not a nice animal.' But that's not true."

In other cases, a seeming inability to empathize resulted in harsh treatment of cats. For example, Dr. Vanover reported an inappropriately angry reaction of a vet who felt that cats' comfort was outweighed by laundry concerns:

I worked for another vet years later who went ballistic one day because all the cats had towels in their cages and he didn't want the kennel help to have to do that much laundry. So he went and ripped all the towels out of all the cat cages.

Similarly, Dr. O'Malley reported feeling helpless as a junior veterinarian witnessing a senior practitioner using outdated, painful handling techniques on a cat:

As someone who's had cats my whole life, it was all I could do to not correct the senior clinician pulling the cat out by the scruff. Like, yeah, of course it's gonna bite your ass...do you wanna be picked up by the collar of your shirt?

In painting this picture, Dr. O'Malley draws on direct bodily comparison between cat and human to consider the cat's discomfort, noting that self-defense is an understandable reaction in any species.

Hands-on Care. Providing hands-on care served for feline veterinarians not only as tending to health, but an opportunity to bond with their patients, with many reporting that they view their patients as analogous to their own cats at home. This results in a protective, even parental, stance toward them, as explained by Dr. Avery: "I always think of my patients as my babies...As far as my own cats, I'll do anything and everything for them, just like I would do anything for my patients." Sometimes, this orientation manifests in resentment for people who have a cavalier attitude toward their cats' well-being. Several vets lamented that at times, they feel that they care more for their patients than the cats' guardians do, an emotionally draining experience as reported by Dr. Reading:

Sometimes it's that you care about their cat more than they do. And that's a soul killer...You would love to be able to help this cat out; it would be so easy if this owner would just get on board and let me do this one freaking thing and I can't do

it. And it's a sweet little cat, or maybe not a sweet little cat, but it's a little being that needs help.

This drive to be with and protect cats is a core element of why most feline veterinarians consider themselves to be cat people, and, according to Dr. Fields, "...enables me to say, 'Well, look, you're in a room with the cat. This is why you're here. You've got hands on a cat. Focus on the cat. Just bring yourself back to the cat.'" Hands-on care, for Dr. Fields, serves the additional purpose of re-centering her attention to the most important being in the healthcare encounter.

Recognizing Self in Cat

As with men, many veterinarians interpreted cats' general demeanor and interests to be similar to their own, with several citing introversion as a trait they share with cats. Dr. Callisto noted that she is "like cats in that I am a social species that is forced to interact with other people by humans." Dr. Reading likened the energy that cats exude to her own:

I've never been a dog person; I've got a cat personality...I think dog and cat people have different vibes...Dog people are generally real extroverts and attention seekers...cat people are more laid back, not so much interested in that kind of energy.

In addition, several people noted the sensory environment that cats favor as similar to their own preferences. Participants described the peaceful, quiet environment they try to cultivate for cats, and Dr. Jessup acknowledged that such an atmosphere signifies her own inclinations as well: "New clients comment on it almost universally, how quiet and calm the hospital is. Part of that reflects my own personality and the way I like things." Several veterinarians also remarked on how small animal practices can induce sensory overload in both cats and themselves. Dr.

Laurier noted that since moving to feline-only practice, she has become less tolerant of noisy environments: “I think a lot of cat people are like that. They don’t like sensory overload; it almost makes them crumble. And I think cats are like that, too.”

Feline veterinarians’ empathy with cats’ bodily experiences of fear and others’ disregard for their comfort, as well as their own recognition of similar traits in themselves, leads to a keen awareness of their own interactions with cats. This results in veterinarians’ purposeful efforts to read cats’ behavior, which they characterize as being aware of and attentive to cats’ own intentional efforts to communicate. In doing so, veterinarians intentionally and attentively create attunement between themselves and their patients.

ATTUNEMENT

Reading and Honoring Behavior

As noted previously, it is important to characterize veterinarians reading cats’ behavior and prioritizing their attempts to communicate as deliberate. As a result of attention to and consideration of these intentions, veterinarians are able to build trust and alleviate stress for cats; validate their own clinical and relational identities; and develop intuition about their patients’ needs.

Building Trust and Alleviating Stress. Similar to men, veterinarians reported that many people—in this case, other veterinarians—do not pay attention to cats’ communicative signals, which results in potentially unsafe medical encounters. Dr. Taggart stated it plainly: “There’s always the risk of getting bit or scratched if you don’t pay attention to what they’re telling you ahead of time.” Dr. Callisto pointed out that many vets “don’t want to work with [cats] because they’re honestly terrified of them.” Dr. Holland suggested that for some veterinarians, practice may become a rote, automated process. However, working with cats is different: “Cats won’t let

you do that. You have to be watching them and thinking about how they're feeling...while you're working with them. And that kind of takes your mind off of you and how you feel in that circumstance." This studied alignment between veterinarian and patient echoes research by Brandt (2004:310), whose participants noted that people who disregard their horse's attempts to communicate do so at their own risk: "He's been telling you for probably weeks before he kicks that something's coming."

In addition to creating a safe environment for themselves and their staff, veterinarians reported that their skill in reading and attending to cats' needs builds trust and alleviates cats' stress during health care encounters. Dr. Quinlan reported this as a gratifying aspect of her job: "If you have an understanding of them, which I feel like I do...it's just very rewarding then to be able to use that and be able to read their behavior and...make their visit less stressful." Several vets noted that though this awareness and subsequent adjustments to cats' needs results in longer appointment times, they consider it a crucial aspect of their practice. Dr. Taggart described his own procedures for easing cats' tension:

The cat needs some time. We always let cats out of the carrier and walk around the room because in that five or 10 minutes that they're doing that...they're getting adjusted to my voice and my movements, and you can see them relax.

Validation of Clinical and Relational Identities. As noted previously, reading and attending to cats' behavioral signals results in safer medical care and permits veterinarians to perform their job more easily. However, as subsequent sections will reveal, granting cats this agency is also a result of veterinarians' recognition of their subjectivity and the critical role doing so plays in the medical encounter. Dr. Limon expressed the joy of practicing this way in her discussion of understanding cats' behavior: "I've learned a lot of things really quickly about

them, personality-wise and that kind of stuff that maybe they don't get to experience as much in a dog/cat practice where the cats maybe are a little more fearful.” In using the phrase “they don’t *get to experience*,” Dr. Limon reveals the professional satisfaction she derives from uncovering cats’ personalities and improving her own understanding of the species. Thus, veterinarians’ ability to interpret cats’ body language also serves as a source of professional identity construction. Armitage-Chan, Maddison, and May (2016) discuss the veterinary professional identity in terms of aptitudes and skills that veterinarians value, such as multitasking, problem-solving, coping with challenges, and management of the veterinary team. In further research, Armitage-Chan and May (2018) identified two distinct characters of the veterinarian professional identity: diagnosis-focused, or a science-based identity centering on clinical aspects of practice, and challenge-focused, a relational identity that considers interactions with clients and colleagues, in addition to aspects of practice management. Continuing this research, Armitage-Chan (2020) found that failure to adopt one of these two identities results in professional dissatisfaction; however, veterinarians struggle to embrace one path, given that the diagnosis identity is more valued in society, and the challenge identity is more valued in actual practice. However, for the veterinarians in this study, a balance between the two identities emerged such that they are able to value not only the broader, relational identity that emerges in their work, but the clinical identity as well. Interpretation of cats’ body language functions as a model for incorporation of both identities, as the goal is both relational and clinical in nature.

Additional validation of the diagnostic identity arises through the complexity of interpreting feline behavior. Many veterinarians in this study view cats as a more challenging, and thus more rewarding, species to work with due to their stoic nature stemming from evolutionary pressure to hide physical weakness. Dr. Avery explained: “Cats don’t tell you when

they're sick. They hide illnesses...a cat's going to go about its merry little way until it can no longer compensate.” This tendency makes the cat a largely silent partner in the diagnostic process, but one whose subtle signals nevertheless become apparent through the process of attunement. This confirms the veterinary diagnostician identity in accordance with findings from Clise, Matthew, and McArthur (2021), who reported that veterinarians’ top sources of professional satisfaction are utilizing their expertise and effecting successful outcomes. Dr. Jessup credited her patients with boosting her professional assurance: “They make me feel expert at something, and I get a lot of satisfaction from my successful cases and improving their health and their health experiences.”

Developing Intuition. Several veterinarians spoke of an affinity for cats—an ineffable quality within themselves that allows them to understand the species on an intuitive level. As Dr. Rocha explained it, “I’ve been called the Cat Whisperer by a lot of people because I can really commune with most cats.” This “sixth sense”—likely a product of working with one species and becoming attuned to the most subtle of movements, communications, and indications—allows vets to practice medicine as both instinct and science. Dr. Jessup likened this experience to popular imagery of an angel guiding behavior: “I tell clients there's a little cat that sits on my shoulder and whispers at me, ‘check my blood pressure,’ <laugh> ‘check my thyroid.’” Though veterinarians themselves speak of this intuition developing over time and as a result of close encounters with cats, their language indicates that they have integrated it as part of their self-concept. As part of this close, perceptive relationship, vets perceive reciprocal behavior from cats, with both parties actively co-constructing mutual action.

Reciprocity

Just as men considered relationships with their cats to be reciprocal, so did veterinarians. This recognition mostly emerged in their relationships with the cats they live with. For example, in another phenomenon mirroring men's experiences, Dr. Starling spoke about satisfaction upon earning a cat's affection: "I had one that was feral. He got trapped when he was 14 weeks old, so he still retained some feral behaviors. Every time he would come over and start purring, it was like a triumph... 'yay! You love me!'" In characterizing the cat as loving her, Dr. Starling implies that the time, attention, and care she devoted to this cat resulted in mutual feelings of affection.

Cats also serve as an important source of emotional support in challenging times. Dr. O'Malley shared, "I went through horrible postpartum [depression] with my daughter. My cats were there when my brain was not my own." Dr. Fields cited cats as key sources of not only emotional support, but identity building in the aftermath of a major life change. In addition to her own cats, she acknowledged the role that her patients played:

I had to reinvent myself, reinvent my life, and the cats were part of that rebuilding.

I found myself becoming closer to them in ways that I wasn't before and really relying on them more for emotional support...and the feline-only job was part of that as well, so all of that counts.

By incorporating them into their self-narratives as agents of support and identity scaffolding, Dr. O'Malley and Dr. Fields signal the give-and-take nature of their relationships with their cats, both at home and in the professional environment.

Developing attunement with cats in personal and professional capacities leads to two transformations in veterinarians' identity. In the first transformation, similar to men, veterinarians develop further understandings of themselves in relation to the agentic beings in

their care. Viewing themselves as co-creators—as opposed to overseers—of the veterinary encounter alongside cats allows veterinarians to respect each individual cat’s preferences and engage with them as partners in the healthcare encounter.

PERSONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: SELF IN RELATION TO AGENTIC BEING

Granting Agency and Individuality

While recognizing commonalities in the species as a whole, interviewees recognized cats’ individual characters, personalities, and preferences. For example, Dr. Humblebee, centering cats’ individuality as a tenet in her approach to practice, rejected the idea that working with the same species over the course of a career is monotonous: “I’ve been doing cats every day of my life now for 35 years and I’m never bored. They’re all different.” Dr. Ziegler likened cats to humans, stating that he views them on the same continuum: “I actually see my cats as little people...I don’t see them as cats...they are individuals, they’re fur people.” His statement here is clearly not literal, but it carries important connotations for the ways that feline veterinarians consider and interact with their patients. Although some might dismiss Dr. Ziegler’s statement as anthropomorphism, it is important to recall Irvine’s (2008b) distinction between sentimental and critical anthropomorphism. While sentimental anthropomorphism bolsters human interests and egos, critical anthropomorphism centers the nonhuman in ways that advance its interests and wellbeing. Here, Dr. Ziegler does not engage in characterizing the cat in ways that serve his own ego; rather, he sees a continuity across species that enables empathy as it acknowledges cats as individuals. As noted previously, feline vets take pride in their ability to read cats’ behaviors, but seeking to discover personalities emerged in interviews, as well. Dr. Starling talked about the process of uncovering a cat’s personality: “I think there’s a bigger range in cat behavior, like

personalities. There's something always inherently doggy about a dog, and cats definitely have a broader range. It's subtle, so you have to look for it."

Participants not only sought to understand their patients on an individual level; they touted the practical and clinical benefits of approaching each cat without preconceptions. Dr. Fields explained that cats' behavior in the veterinary clinic may be unpredictable, which some veterinarians find intimidating: "With cats, I have zero expectations of what their behavior is going to be. I just expect them to behave in a way that expresses how they feel at that moment." Accepting cats as intersubjective actors means that the feline veterinarian acknowledges as a truth of their profession that no two individuals will be identical; expecting the unexpected is the reality of practice. Proceeding in this mindset benefits patients, as well. Dr. Monday observed that "The cats are much more relaxed. They're allowed to have their personalities, they're allowed to have their feelings." By acting in a non-judgmental way toward cat behavior, veterinarians also validate the cat guardian. Veterinarians' acceptance of cats' individual behaviors and personalities reassures guardians that the animal they love is not perceived in a negative way; by extension, the guardian's "good parent" identity is preserved. Dr. Laurier explained her approach to reassuring guardians who apologize for their cat's behavior:

Cats will hiss at us and the people get, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And I'm like, "No, that's okay. I respect your cat's feelings about me. That's fine. That's normal cat behavior." And that's not a cat...being mean. That's a cat expressing their feelings.

And usually they're doing that because they're nervous, they're scared.

Veterinarians' understanding that each clinical encounter will differ due to individual dispositions thus results in strengthened relationships with both patient and client.

In addition to personalities, veterinarians discern differences in cats' preferences. This recognition grants cats agency to act as contributors to their health care experiences, just as human physicians aim to make their patients active participants in the process of care. Of course, cats cannot engage in their health care in the same ways that human adults can, the most notable differences being the inability to detail their physical state through human language and, more significantly for the purposes of this study, the incapacity to participate in decision-making regarding treatment. In this critical stage of the healthcare encounter, the tripartite veterinarian-client-patient relationship is structured most similarly to that of pediatrician-parent-child in terms of an intermediary tasked with making decisions on behalf of the patient (Rollin 2002). The assumption in these situations is that the patient is incapable of making informed decisions about their care, so the responsibility falls on their guardian to act in their best interests. The glaring distinction in the veterinarian/pediatrician analogy is the status of the companion animal as property and the attendant rights of the human client to exercise their own autonomy regarding the animal's care (Hiestand 2022). A further divergence between veterinary and pediatric decision-making appears as children age, as researchers contend that developmental stage should be considered when gauging the degree to which children are granted some autonomy in care decisions (Obradović et al. 2006; Tait, Voepel-Lewis, and Malviya 2003). Still, Olszewski and Goldkind (2018) assert that even younger children may be granted some agency in medical encounters by allowing them to choose, for example, the arm receiving a vaccine. Since companion animals will never speak a satisfactory language to communicate their preferences, their silence is generally interpreted as assent *prima facie*.

Given these realities, most discussion around autonomy in veterinary encounters centers around clients, not patients. In the present study, however, veterinarians aimed to involve cats in

their own care, to the extent possible, in two major ways: accommodating cats' individual preferences, and letting cats set the tone of the health care encounter by respecting their boundaries.

Partnering in Health Care

Feline veterinarians recognize and honor an obligation to care for cats in a manner that aligns with their nature and preferences. Many of my participants' experiences in small animal clinics inspired resistance to traditional veterinary practice that deprioritizes cats' unique needs and innate behaviors. As a result, vets noted how they respond to changes in patient behavior during the course of the visit. They used language that positions the cat as not a passive recipient of health care, but as an active subject who guides the process in concert with their doctor. Several veterinarians talked about the systems they have in place to accommodate each cat's preferences for being handled. Dr. Monday described a process of notation in each cat's medical record: "We're able to hone it with each individual animal. We're always, constantly making notes in the file: likes a towel wrap, hates the towel wrap. The mask works well to calm them, hates the mask." This could be dismissed as simply trying to keep staff safe; however, honoring each cat's preference rather than simply using the same system of restraint for every animal—which would certainly be more efficient—shows respect for the cat as an individual. Dr. Humblebee exemplified this attitude when she acknowledged, "They're all different. They each need their own attention, and you have to vary what you do for them."

Practicing medicine in this way demonstrates feline veterinarians' respect for cats' autonomy. Cats' preference for quiet environments, reluctance to trust unknown people, and fear of new environments are all defied during veterinary encounters, which can make engaging with them mindfully a challenge. As such, feline veterinarians consider these boundaries and alter

their behavior accordingly. When caring for cats, Dr. O'Malley noted, "You just have to be more patient and you can't do as much as quickly unless the kitty says it's okay. They're really the bosses." This results in slower, more considered practice as cats dictate the terms of the appointment. When treatment decisions must be made, veterinary expertise, willingness to honor feline communication, and guardians' knowledge of the individual cat combine to form a "relational approach" toward care, rather than a paternalistic stance that disregards cats' boundaries (Hiestand 2022; Reyes-Illg 2017:4).

As noted earlier, practicing feline medicine mindfully is a conscious decision on the part of feline veterinarians and potentially constitutes an act of resistance toward a system that regards cats' interests as secondary to dogs'. While little is written about acts of resistance in veterinary medicine, turning again to human medicine may provide a useful analogy. Reflecting on the culture of medical education, Hafferty and colleagues (2016) note that physician identity formation involves a process that challenges the systems—in this case, education—that produce the physician identity in the first place. In the spirit of changing systems, Ellaway and Wyatt (2021:1525) conceptualize physician resistance as "a challenge to the status quo, while advocacy seeks ways to adapt it or work around it." It is difficult to discern whether the veterinarians in this study view themselves as actively working to change the veterinary system. Some may argue that the establishment of feline-only practices is itself a challenge to a system that deprioritizes and provides little accommodation for these animals. This may be especially germane in the face of increasing corporate ownership of veterinary practices, where profit margins dictate volume, thereby giving the feline practitioner little room to practice medicine individually and intentionally (Hale 2023). Taking on the mantle of a contested identity may itself constitute an

act of resistance, as evidenced in the following discussion of identity challenges encountered by feline veterinarians.

SOCIAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: SELF IN RELATION TO SOCIETY AND OTHER VETS

Other Vets and Society Mirror Each Other

Feline veterinarians seek to correct what they view within veterinary medicine as a reflection of long-held societal disdain for—or at least indifference to—cats. They positioned themselves as different from other veterinary professionals and as sitting somewhat outside the veterinary industry as a whole. Society, their colleagues, and the structure within which they operate embody two truths for feline vets, one following directly from the other: cats are viewed as inferior companion animals by both the veterinary industry and society, and thus cat care suffers.

Cats are Inferior. As noted earlier, many participants noted sub-standard—or even cruel—actions toward cats during their work in small animal practice. Many interviewees remarked that cats' inherently less trusting nature and the possibility of lashing out due to fear makes them unattractive patients to many veterinarians who work primarily with dogs. However, attitudes and actions toward them are also influenced even before setting foot in the exam room due to widespread notions of cats as mean, nasty, and difficult. Veterinary professionals—even those who love animals on the whole—are not immune to internalizing negative messaging surrounding cats. Dr. Callisto cited this societal disdain as a major influence on her choice to treat cats only: “Cats have always been second-class citizens. That’s a big reason why I went into feline medicine.”

However, as my participants reported, cats are not the only second-class citizens; societal disdain for cats transfers to those who devote their lives to caring for them, which is an affront to

personal and professional identity. Feline veterinarians are not taken seriously as medical professionals, as is evident in others' reactions to learning that they work only with cats. Dr. Cleary stated that some other veterinarians are dismissive toward feline practitioners, characterizing them as no risk to their own livelihood: "I don't think a regular practice ever perceives a feline-only practice as any sort of a threat to their business because they don't think we're ever going to pull that many people." This view persists, despite the fact that 26 percent of United States households include at least one cat (AVMA 2024).

Some participants in the current study reported masking their veterinarian identity in public due to the torrent of questions and emotional labor that inevitably follow disclosing their profession. Dr. Waters admitted,

I actually will try to avoid telling people that I'm a veterinarian when I'm out and about, because it leads to those conversations where I am having to figure out what's going on with their dog or their cat, or they're telling me about their pet that just died, and it gets to be a lot.

The feline veterinarian identity in particular, however, seems to invite judgment. Dr. Limon described being the target of derision upon new acquaintances learning about her profession: "As soon as it comes out that I'm a cat vet and someone makes that face, I'm like, 'Well, I gotta go'...I don't wanna stand here and take your abuse." Many participants also noted that people are surprised to learn that feline-specific veterinarians exist. Dr. Fields remarked, "A lot of people are surprised... 'Oh my god, why is there such a thing? I can't believe there is such a thing. Why would you need that?'"

Given the cat's low esteem in society, it is not so far-fetched to imagine that those who care for them are devalued. Compounding the lack of respect for feline care, it seems to be more

acceptable to disparage cats publicly than it is dogs. Generally taking the form of stereotypes about cats' indifference to humans—and ultimately, likely rooted in a desire for dominance thwarted by cats' independence—it is socially acceptable to proclaim hatred of cats or characterize them as unlikable. For the feline veterinarian, this lack of self-censorship comes from many angles. Dr. Rocha told a story about the priest at her former church and his characterization of cats as demonic:

I actually got up and walked out of my church one Sunday and never went back. St. Francis of Assisi Day was coming up and he talked about they're going to have a blessing of the pets. And then he paused and said, "Well no, we're going to have a blessing of the dogs. We're going to have exorcisms of the cats." And he just went on a tirade. And after about a minute and a half I got up and walked out and it took me a good minute to get out of the church. He was still ranting and I never went back.

Comments denigrating cats are common in one-on-one interactions, as well. Fellow veterinarians are one group who make their feelings known about their dislike of cats. Dr. Ziegler talked about his experience at an educational seminar: "I'm sitting next to [another veterinarian] and she's telling me how much she hates cats. I'm thinking, you know what in the heck you're sitting next to?...I go, <rolls eyes> oh brother." Even friends and family show a lack of consideration when discussing their dislike of cats. Dr. Quinlan shared, incredulously,

I have people even within my own circle and family that have said to me they hate cats. They don't understand what I do. And I said, "You do realize that you just said that to someone that spends their life <laugh> taking care of cats." That is so rude!

Negative attitudes toward cats in society and in veterinary medicine coalesce to challenge the feline veterinarian identity, which has implications for the veterinarian's self-concept and emotional state. Identity theory holds that negative emotion arises when one's identity is not verified by others, especially when such challenges are persistent (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 1999). Furthermore, when a particularly valued identity is contested, greater distress results (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2023b). Given that the majority of the veterinarians in the present study identified veterinarian—and for most of that majority, *feline* veterinarian—as either the primary or a large component of their selves, this finding has implications for these respondents' well-being.

Cat Care Suffers. Negative attitudes toward cats also result in lower investment in their health, creating a tangible disparity in how many people's cherished companions are cared for. At the societal level, stereotypes of cats as self-sufficient and the lower value placed on them contribute to fewer veterinary visits (Rodan and Heath 2016). The larger veterinary medical system routinely deprioritizes cats, as well. My participants unanimously reported that cats are secondary at best in the veterinary medical institution as a whole—not only in small animal practices, but in education, pharmaceuticals, and research. Dr. Jessup posited that this could be due to the financial reality of patient composition in individual practice: “Small animal practices are 70% dog, and everything they do for cats is a compromise.” However, as noted above, the propensity of small animal veterinarians to openly declare their dislike of not only working with cats, but the animals themselves indicates that financial considerations are only a piece of the story. Attitudes both in society and in the veterinary medical institution negatively impact the ways that cats are treated at many small animal practices. Dr. Fields lamented the way that cats are viewed: “I come from [a rural area], where people often would look at cats as what I call

paper towel pets: they're disposable." This attitude carries over to the way that some small animal veterinarians practice feline medicine and the assumptions they make about how cat guardians view their companions. Dr. Fields continued:

There are some vets in cat and dog practices who just don't push for working up cats' medical cases very far, and they just assume that, "It's a cat, the owner's not going to want to do this; it's just a cat."

Veterinarians' own prejudices against cats, as well as refusal to accommodate cats' innate behaviors, also affect medical care. My participants reported that some small practice veterinarians so thoroughly dislike working with cats that routine care is rushed in an attempt to get through the exam as quickly as possible. Dr. Starling recounted, "I hear from people who come to me later on... 'Yeah, the vet just kind of puts their hands a little bit on the cat and doesn't do a super thorough exam.'" This can lead to missing important indicators of poor health or pain. Annoyed, Dr. O'Malley recalled, "I've had owners come to me as a second opinion... 'They said just give 'em some dental treats.' And I look in the mouth and the teeth were rotten!"

Compounding the difficulty of receiving care, several respondents reported that their patients have been dismissed from other practices when the cat didn't behave in accordance with the veterinarian's expectations. Dr. Laurier observed, "I see a lot of patients that... have been to the doggy doctor, and the doggy doctor's like, 'I can't deal with you. You're going to have to go somewhere else.'" Dismissing feline patients due to "bad" behavior disregards the intrinsically cautious behavior of cats in new environments, as well as the realities of keeping them indoors, where they are not socialized to the same extent as dogs. Moreover, it demonstrates that many veterinarians are unwilling to change their own behavior and practices to consider the needs of their different patients. Dr. O'Malley expressed irritation at this lack of accommodation:

They are expected to behave as small dogs in the clinic setting... We don't socialize them to go walk at the park and behave, to not bite strangers; they chill in their house or in their yard. So you bring them into a clinic setting with barking dogs, people that are loud and fast, and expect them to behave? It's frustrating.

Furthermore, interviewees reported that veterinarians' disdain for cats can translate to disdain for their caregivers, another factor contributing to cats receiving lower quality care. Several respondents indicated that their clients did not feel they were respected or listened to at small animal practices. Dr. Callisto explained, "The ones that come to us for second opinions... it's because they feel like they were not treated well or their vet didn't take them seriously." Given the cultural acceptability of denigrating cats, it is no surprise that cat guardians are not held in the same esteem as other animal caregivers, and sometimes this can lead to dismissal of very real concerns. Unsurprising though it may be, the outcomes can be devastating for the patient. Dr. O'Malley provided an example:

People that come in and say, "My cat's just off," [other veterinarians are] gonna roll their eyes. "What the heck? You're a crazy cat lady." Well, the cat may really have pancreatitis, right? So when someone says to me, "He's just not himself," I take that seriously, 'cause I know cats.

Several respondents took pride in the role they can play as a sympathetic ear to cat guardians, who have often been made to feel as if they are responsible for their cats lashing out. Dr. Laurier described the sense of relief when new clients realize she is not judging them:

The minute I walk in the room, I'm like, "Hi, I'm Dr. Laurier," and then the cat's like <hisses>. And I'm like, that's totally cool. I get it. That's fine. And the

client...the minute you have that reaction...they're so happy that you're not like,
“Whoa!”

In addition to feeling reassured that they are not being judged, the feline veterinarian’s ease with cats engenders a feeling of trust and safety among cat guardians, resulting in more open, honest dialogue about their cats’ behaviors that may reveal health concerns. Dr. Humblebee noted, “They feel more comfortable telling you things that often are very important to know.”

Views of cats as secondary patients are also rampant in veterinary education, which uses the dog as a standard model for teaching future clinicians how to care for small animals. The veterinarians I spoke to characterized lectures during veterinary school as focused on dogs, with perhaps a brief mention of cats as an afterthought. Dr. Reading gave an example:

Let's say you're studying cardiovascular medicine or something like that, it's dog dog dog dog, and in the last 10 minutes of the lecture, they go, “Okay, and this is the kinds of diseases you might find in cat hearts.”

Dr. Humblebee—giving the caveat that her veterinary education began in the early 1980s—reported being astonished when she arrived at vet school to find the textbooks contained information that she, as a cat lover, knew was erroneous. Incredulously, she noted, “It was sad. The textbooks, even as a vet student, I knew they were wrong <laugh>. When they did mention cats, they were wrong. They would say things like cats don't overeat. Well, yes they do.”

Attitudes toward cats as inferior recipients of care are also entrenched in the veterinary pharmaceutical industry. Several veterinarians reported that most medications used for cats are actually developed and tested for dogs, and feline veterinarians are left to prescribe medications off-label—that is, for use in a species it is not technically approved for—and hope that it has a similar effect in healing cats. Dr. Monday related that pharmaceutical companies “...wait ‘til

people start using it off-label and see what it does on cats... You call the company for backup and they're like, 'Oh, well, we're not labeled for that.' So they just sidestep that whole situation."

This lack of support extends to professional organizations and research on cat disease, which leads to less applicable continuing education for the feline veterinarian. Educational sessions at mainstream veterinary conferences, Dr. Rocha attested, are overwhelmingly aimed at dogs:

"Even if they say it's on skin disease in dogs and cats, it's 99% dogs and then they show a picture of a cat with a flea. That's pretty much it." Most of the veterinarians I spoke with reported that in terms of professional development, they engage mainly with the American Association of Feline Practitioners. They spoke highly of the organization's value to them as professionals in contrast to universal veterinary organizations such as the American Veterinary Medical Association and general veterinary journals, where cats remain underrepresented.

This lack of attention among the institutions that support veterinary practice led many of my participants to underscore—some with visible frustration—a common truism among veterinarians with an interest in caring for cats: "Cats are not small dogs." This adage is useful not only in thinking about models of disease and care for cats, but as a reminder of the secondary status cats occupy in society and in veterinary medicine relative to dogs, a phenomenon cat behaviorist Jackson Galaxy refers to as "looking at cats through dog-colored glasses" (Stewart 2023). The participants in the present study, in working to defy these norms and holding distinctive expertise about cats, serve as advocates for their patients in a process that confirms the feline veterinarian identity.

Advocacy

By acting as agents of care in ways that make cats and their caregivers feel as comfortable as possible, feline veterinarians are able to resist the norms prevailing in traditional

veterinary medicine that lead to inferior care. In this way, feline veterinarians are attempting to correct the deficiencies that arise as a result of both the veterinary industry's and society's neglect of cats' needs. Dr. Waters explained,

By being a cat only vet, I can advocate for them; I can say, "Hey, no, your cat should come in. They should get treatment. There are ways to make the process less stressful for them." We can make this a happy experience for all of us so that we have happy, healthy cats.

The advocate role—informed by not only care, but specialized knowledge—is claimed by many students as part of the collective veterinary identity during their education (Vermilya 2022). In addition, for many of my participants, desire to act as an advocate was spurred early in their careers by experiences that clearly positioned cats as worthy of inferior care and their caregivers as unreliable narrators. These experiences enabled them to create a cat advocate identity in opposition to other small animal veterinarians and societal messaging that disparages the patients in their care. Dr. Limon described herself and her ethos as essential to this larger shift toward compassionate, thorough care: "They need me to advocate for them for the kind of care that I think cats deserve to have." Serving as an advocate is further developed through two channels: expertise and confirmation of the feline veterinarian identity.

Expertise. Feline veterinarians pride themselves on the expertise they have developed by focusing on one species, which allows them to practice medicine with deep, specialized knowledge. Some feline veterinarians spoke of themselves as specialists, while others view their role as generalized feline care in the sense of human general practitioners. A commonality that emerged, however, was confidence in their knowledge about cats. Participants consistently spoke about the value of possessing knowledge about felines that small animal veterinarians do not

develop due to the need to maintain knowledge about several species concurrently. Dr. Fields explained that “[Practicing feline medicine] has enabled me to really go deep in informing myself about their physiology, their medicine, their behavior. It has allowed a higher level of specialization, which I think is really valuable.” Several participants remarked that they are more effective cat veterinarians than they were small practice veterinarians due to this specialized knowledge.

Some noted that holding this expertise sets them apart from their small animal colleagues who find cats challenging to work with. Dr. Quinlan admitted that she finds this to be an appealing aspect of practice: “I find it challenging, but...I like that...if everyone finds them challenging and I get them, that’s really cool.” Dr. Reading shared that she and her veterinary technicians joke about the lack of technical expertise among other veterinarians when it comes to treating cats:

I'm joking around with the techs and going, “Oh, we need to get urine from a cat.”

If you know how that's done, you have to inject a sterile needle right through the body wall into the bladder and get yourself a sample. So I'll be feeling a pretty small bladder and go, “Oh, a cat vet can hit that.” And they say, “Oh, are you a cat vet today?” And if I hit the bladder, then yes...I'm a cat vet. And if no, I'm a dog vet.

By comparing their knowledge and skills to their colleagues in small animal practice, feline veterinarians are able to set themselves apart and confirm the advocate identity. This aligns with research surrounding the positioning of one’s identity in direct opposition to another, less desirable identity. For example, Snow and Anderson (1987) described the techniques that individuals experiencing homelessness use to distance themselves from others they perceive as

giving rise to negative stereotypes. Unhoused persons with companion animals similarly crafted responsible animal guardian identities for themselves, standing in contrast to traditional ideas of what living with a pet entails (Irvine, Kahl, and Smith 2012). Likewise, feline veterinarians distance themselves from veterinarians who do not care for cats adequately while receiving confirmation of their identity from two external sources: clients and other feline health professionals.

Confirmation of Identity. When discussing the benefits of feline-only practice, Dr. Cleary reflected, “I think the more involved you get in working with cats and working with people that have cats, you kind of start to see your people.” The first example of this is guardians, who, through caring for their companions, share both a common goal and a common identity with feline veterinarians. One manifestation of this identity emerges through guardians’ gratitude toward feline veterinarians, in whom they sense similar affinity and deep compassion for the species. Dr. Rocha described how her clients demonstrate this appreciation:

One of the things I hear from clients all the time, especially new clients, is they can just tell within 10 seconds of me being in a room with them that I love cats, that I will do anything for their cat.

This apparent love for the species demonstrates to clients that cat veterinarians value the same things they do, and that the veterinarian is committed to ensuring the cat’s well-being in ways that perhaps the guardian had not experienced in the past. One aspect of this understanding arises when cat guardians and veterinarians are able to relate to one another on the common ground of living with cats. Noted similarities in outlook and interests as cat people allows feline veterinarians to relate to their clients more easily. Dr. Waters noted, “It’s nice for them to have somebody to relate to, because I can tell them things like, ‘Yeah, my cat does the exact same

thing that your cat is doing, and here's how I manage it.'" Triangulation of commitment and similitude benefits the practitioner in the clinic, as well. Dr. Abernathy commented that confidence in a cat guardian's attitude toward their companion enhances her practice: "For the vast majority of people, they see their cats as members of their family. And that is fun for me because I don't have to wonder where they're at."

Similarly, veterinarians in feline-only practices receive confirmation of their identity from their colleagues within the practice. Other veterinarians, veterinary technicians or assistants, and administrative professionals co-create an environment conducive to practicing feline medicine due to similarities in love for the species, knowledge, and ideals. For many, this emerges in understanding of cat behavior, again allowing veterinary professionals to resist traditional conceptions of cats as mean or hostile. Dr. Rocha remarked, "We see some fairly aggressive cats sometimes, but we can manage usually pretty well with them because we're all cat people. We're equipped to it. And I think cats can sense the fact that we like cats." Here, Dr. Rocha refers to the attunement that she and her staff have developed as cat people and professionals who have acquired specialized knowledge. This bi-directional communication between people and cats, Dr. Rocha asserted, is beneficial to both. In addition, it serves as a source of identity confirmation for the veterinarian and their staff, who receive validation of both their professional competence and attunement as a cat person. In a similar way to the above discussion about expertise, some participants reported comparing themselves to others as a source of identity confirmation. Dr. Laurier laughed as she described how she and her staff bond over their cat person identities: "We have a saying here. When someone comes in and they're really loud and kind of exuberant, we'll always be like, 'Wow, that person's got a lot of dog energy.'" By comparing themselves to dog people, veterinarians and other staff members confirm

their cat person identities while simultaneously re-affirming the clinic's special status as an environment for cats to assert their own individuality.

For several of my participants, the cat person identity is such a prominent facet of their self-concept that challenges to the identity precipitated career changes. As noted above, for many respondents, mistreatment of cats at previous jobs resulted in a shift in identity to one who advocates for cats. However, an innate orientation as a cat person similarly—or simultaneously—motivated some respondents to move to feline-only practice. Dr. Taggart noted the importance of working with others who share his identity:

The tipping point is working with people who really want to be with cats. And I can remember specifically working with one technician who in frustration said, “I hate working with cats.” And I was like, well, okay. I need to be somewhere else.

For other respondents, working with other cat people was not essential, but working with cats was, and served as sole motivation for a career change. Dr. Humblebee described her process as she contemplated a career move while working in small animal practice:

I was miserable, absolutely miserable. And I was thinking, I'm just gonna quit veterinary medicine. I'd wanted to be a veterinarian literally since I was four years old, and before I even knew what one was, actually...I just sat down and wrote down all the things that I wanted that would make my life happier. The first thing was cats only. Dogs are okay, but they aren't cats.

For these individuals, confirmation of the cat person identity—whether through seeking out like-minded individuals or simply knowing themselves—served as a motivation to shape a lifelong career. Stets (2004:54) noted that “Adequate role performance produces positive emotion.” For the interviewees in this study, becoming a feline veterinarian gave them latitude to practice

medicine on their terms—on their cat patients’ terms—and led to congruence between the personal and the professional self, as noted by Dr. Avery:

I think I've just been able to flourish because I got to do what I wanted to do. And so, truly, this is me. This is me, the cat person. I was able to finally just let me be me.

Professional satisfaction derived from a switch to feline medicine is unsurprising, as discord between one’s self-concept and the realities of the profession can have consequences for veterinarians’ careers. In studying veterinarians’ identities, Page-Jones and Abbey (2015) discovered that individuals who feel friction between their identities and their work tend to seek different employment opportunities rather than make concessions to the person they believe themselves to be.

CONCLUSION

Feline veterinarians’ caregiving experiences with cats constitute the majority of embodied experiences and subsequent somatic awareness through three primary means: elicitation of empathy, provision of hands-on care, and recognizing oneself in cats. Many participants developed empathy for cats as they witnessed patients’ fear at small animal clinics, where cats’ cautious natures and sensory preferences were routinely disregarded. Furthermore, some witnessed cruel treatment of cats, such as use of painful handling and restraint techniques. Interviewees reported that veterinarians and staff in small practice clinics regularly denigrated feline patients, characterizing them as deliberately vicious or behaviorally unstable. This study’s participants became acutely aware of cats’ traumatic healthcare encounters and attempted to engage with their patients’ experiences through direct bodily comparison. Ultimately, these undertakings prompted many participants to pursue a feline-only career.

Deliberate, thorough hands-on care serves not only to ensure patient health, but to encourage bonding and close knowledge of each cat. Many veterinarians reported that they view their patients in the same ways as their cats at home; they consider themselves responsible for the well-being of the cats in their care, and thus an emotional, parental protectiveness results. Concurrently, veterinarians bond with cats through recognizing many similar traits between themselves and the species. Several participants characterized cats as introverted, a trait they reported in themselves. Others did not use the term “introverted” directly, but depicted the energy that cats exude—unobtrusive and calm—as similar to their own. In addition, some interviewees described the clinic setting they create for cats as peaceful and quiet, matching their own preferences in addition to those of cats.

Experiencing empathy and recognizing similarities to their own selves resulted in veterinarians’ deliberately crafted attunement with cats’ unique needs and behaviors. Mindfully engaging in interaction allows them to be attentive to patients’ intentional communication and tailor the healthcare encounter to each individual. This process allows vets to not only create a safer environment for themselves and their staff, but build trust with their patients and alleviate their stress. In addition, through emphasizing attention to cats’ behaviors, veterinarians simultaneously embody both clinical and relational identities, the former of which is further validated by satisfaction from understanding felines’ more challenging medical needs. This confirms veterinarians’ professional identities as experts and skillful diagnosticians. Some participants reported developing an instinctual affinity for cats as a result of years of close attunement and recognition of cats’ subtle bodily movements and communications. Attunement with cats also emerged in veterinarians’ recognition of the reciprocal relationships with their own cats through earning their affection and receiving it back in the form of emotional support.

The resulting identity shifts experienced by veterinarians emerged first in a parallel to men: transformation of the self in relation to an agentic being. Also similar to men, vets situated cats as autonomous subjects with individual preferences and characteristics. However, the veterinary setting allowed this assignation to transpire in different ways. Veterinarians rejected the idea that working with the same species becomes repetitive, as each cat's needs are different and requires attention to the subtleties of their behavior. They explained the value of viewing each cat as an individual and entering the healthcare encounter without expectations about behavior, thus allowing cats to express their emotions without judgment on the part of their doctor. Furthermore, this approach reassures the cat's guardian and upholds their identity as a good caregiver.

Honoring cats' preferences also allows veterinarians to grant them autonomy in the healthcare setting to the extent possible. While the inability to speak human language precludes verbal understanding, feline veterinarians prioritize the ways that cats *can* communicate to preserve the cat's agency. They do this by carefully studying each patient's reaction to accommodations meant to de-escalate stress; for instance, some cats react well to being wrapped tightly in towels, while others prefer masks designed to remove visual stimuli. In addition, they prioritize practicing in ways that allow cats to acclimate to the new environment and the people within, resulting in slower, more considered appointments.

Practicing in ways that privilege feline nature and elevate individual agency potentially constitute acts of resistance toward a system that deprioritizes the needs and comfort of the species. In this way, veterinarians experienced a second identity transformation in relation to both society and other vets. This identity shift entails pushback against ingrained negative attitudes toward cats in society, which are reflected by many veterinarians and the veterinary

industry. Negative attitudes toward cats are in turn reflected in negative attitudes toward feline practitioners, who receive feedback that their work is unnecessary and undesirable, and that their patients are difficult and disagreeable. Other veterinarians, family members, friends, and even strangers find it perfectly acceptable to denigrate feline veterinary work and the patients themselves, challenging the feline vet's identity and giving rise to negative emotion.

Negative stereotypes about cats also result in less complete care for the species, further contesting the feline vet identity. On the practice level, assumptions about cat guardians' lower investment in their companions results in views of cats as disposable and not worth aggressive treatment. Furthermore, negative views of cats translate to negative views of cat guardians, which results in feelings of shame and reluctance to be forthcoming with vital information about their cats' behavior or health. Some veterinarians are so averse to working with cats that their exams are perfunctory and critical markers of pain or disease are overlooked. In addition, misattribution of fearful behavior to malice can lead to dismissal of the feline patient. The veterinary industry also does not support cat care to the same extent as dog care, and this manifests in fewer educational opportunities, pharmaceuticals, and medical studies.

Feline veterinarians challenge these realities and reclaim their identities as advocates for cats by providing expert medical care in environments that cater to cats' inherent natures and their individuality. In doing so, they distance themselves from their colleagues who do not provide effective, compassionate cat care. Their feline veterinarian identity is confirmed through interactions with not only their patients, but with cats' guardians and colleagues at their practice. For some vets, working with other cat people is a requirement for career satisfaction; for others, an internal alignment with the cat person identity serves as their foundation for professional fulfillment.

The cats with whom feline veterinarians work and live contribute in similar ways to personal and professional identities. For cat fanciers, the cats they work with *are* the cats they live with. Cat fanciers, or hobbyists, intentionally produce and raise kittens who they will send to other homes in a matter of weeks, as well as cats who will become their own companions and central figures in a competitive hobby. In my next findings chapter, I explore how individual cats, as well as the breeds fanciers support, shape their identities.

Chapter 6
“Camaraderie of Cats”:
The Identities of Cat Fanciers

Hank served 13 years in the military before returning home and spending the summer traveling with a friend who had become involved in the world of the cat fancy. “Basically schlepping cages,” he said of his role, though he quickly became intrigued by the different cat breeds he encountered in the show hall. One in particular stood out, however. The cats that captured Hank’s heart won him over with their beautiful eyes. Looking into “one of those hard-sided...wood cages, kind of dark inside, not completely well-lit,” Hank saw “these green...eyes shining out at me. And I just fell in love with those eyes.” Hank’s friend took note of his interest and invited him to visit a cat breeder with her. The breeder placed a baby in Hank’s arms, and enamored, he purchased the kitten. But another life-changing event was waiting in the wings: three years later, he married the woman who sold him the kitten.

For several decades, Hank and his wife have been traveling to shows around the world, breeding kittens, and showing their best cats. They have recently discontinued their breeding program, as “we were having trouble getting up and down off the floor, and I’m not going to put ‘em in cages.” However, Hank has another major role in the cat fancy: he has been an allbreed judge for over 20 years. His motivation for continuing in the judging program despite no longer breeding cats is straightforward. He described the exhilaration when he is presented with a winning cat: “I still get a thrill when I pull a cat out that is absolutely drop dead gorgeous, and I remember the really, really good ones that I’ve seen in the past with great fondness.” When he doesn’t feel that thrill anymore, Hank says, he will retire. Hank knows that he is so deep into the hobby that he will have to rely on his wife to tell him when he’s ready to stop judging. He told

her, “Okay, you're in charge of whether or not I'm having fun <laugh> because I will be way too close to it to know.”

The cat fancy is part of a tradition of showcasing animals in competition, whether for their aesthetic attributes; their skill in a sport, such as horse jumping or canine agility; or their production potential, as in livestock shows. Most of these competitions are accessible to the public and serve as sites of entertainment, facilitating what Franklin (1999:62) referred to as “the zoological gaze.” The zoological gaze, Franklin contends, is universal: looking at animals is enjoyable and prompts contemplation on both their similarities to humans and their differences as we attempt to contextualize their, and our own, roles in the social world. Furthermore, for many people, such as Hank, these competitions serve as sites of serious leisure, or

...the committed pursuit of a core leisure experience that is substantial, interesting, and fulfilling, and where engagement is characterized by *unique identities* and leads to a variety of outcomes for the person, social world, and communities within which the person is immersed (Gallant, Arai, and Smale 2013:104) (emphasis added).

Describing the fancy as a hobby and noting the role that the human gaze plays may appear to downplay the cat's active role in this narrative. On the contrary, I found that cats themselves play major roles in the fancier identity—though, as I will detail, in different ways than those of men and feline veterinarians. Stone's (2022) ethnographic, cat-focused study of the fancy describes the interwoven social milieus that surround and reinforce the hobby. The present research, though observing some of the same phenomena, examines the “unique identities” of cat fanciers as related to the breeds they represent and the individuals, both feline and human, who co-create and sustain these identities. In this chapter, I showcase identity transformation among

people involved in the cat fancy hobby, drawing from interviews with 16 participants across the United States.

The first identity transformation I describe emerged as cat fanciers positioned their sense of self to a specific breed. The second relates to the self within the network of cat people in which fanciers play a role, and in relation to society, where they feel they must defend an oft-contested identity. Attunement with the cats under their care develops as fanciers serve in parent and grandparent roles, which they characterized as reciprocal relationships. In addition, fanciers experienced attunement to their chosen breeds, manifesting in special knowledge of their characteristics and alignment with their personalities. Attunement arises from the embodied interactions of showing and caregiving, including breeding and raising kittens. My account of these transformations begins with description of the embodied experiences of cat fanciers. I then describe the attunement they experience with cats both as breed representatives and as individuals. I conclude by detailing the two identity transformations experienced by cat fanciers as a result of experiences with their cats and immersion in the hobby.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCES WITH CATS

Embodied experiences with cats takes two major forms among cat fanciers. The first is participation in cat shows. The International Cat Association (TICA) holds cat shows year-round, with each official season running from May 1 to April 30 (TICA 2017). Similarly, the show season for the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) runs from the first weekend of May through the final weekend of April (CFA 2022). Both associations hold shows worldwide, and participation varies among fanciers. Some of my interviewees reported that they attend as many shows as possible, while others enter only a few per year. Involvement depends on a variety of factors, including other personal commitments and whether the fancier has a winning cat they are hoping

to achieve championship status¹ with. Whichever organization the fancier aligns with, the process of showing the cat and winning awards is a series of embodied experiences characterizing the human-cat relationship within the context of the hobby.

Participating in Cat Shows

Preparing for and Interacting at Shows. Preparing to attend a cat show may be a multi-day process, often requiring multi-hour car or airline travel and overnight stays in hotels. Grooming is an opportunity for intensive hands-on interaction between guardian and cat, though cats' levels of patience for this activity vary. Ayla reported that bathing and blow-drying her longhaired cat is a four-hour process that he merely "tolerates." She and her mother often travel together to shows, and her mother's cat has very short hair: "I joke with her that she washes hers in a gas station sink before we show up at the show hall." On the day of the show, exhibitors set up their cats' cages with curtains, panels, or other methods of limiting their cats' visual stimuli to alleviate stress. Some fanciers like to decorate their space with information about their breed or the particular cat they're showing, and many cages are adorned with rosettes and ribbons from previous shows. Snacks, for both human and cat, and other essentials—such as grooming supplies and toys—surround cages. These elements of material culture seem to be fairly consistent across shows on the whole, but not among competitors, whose setups may range from elaborate, eye-catching displays celebrating their breed, complete with lights and props, to a spartan cage with just enough drapery to obscure the cat's vision.

Even though fanciers do spend most of the day near their cats' enclosures, Stone (2019) asserted that relationship-building with cats is limited in the show arena. Most of my participants

¹Each cat fancy organization uses its own terminology to designate competition-eligible cats, breed statuses, and the top winners for each year. Here, and throughout this chapter, I am speaking of "championship status" in the generic sense, i.e., winning top awards, regardless of organizational affiliation.

aligned with this finding, though two did mention show participation as an opportunity to bond. Rafe, for example, spoke of having “moments” with his cat while they are benched, that is, waiting for their turn to enter the judging ring. However, he viewed traveling with her as the major source of becoming closer: “I flew all over the place with her, and the crazy thing is, we got so bonded through that time.” This implies that Rafe and his cat co-create their relationship in a more private, intimate setting than the cat show itself allows. Given this, I concur with Stone that the show arena—as well as the enterprising nature of the cat fancy hobby—limits human-cat bonding; however, I contend that the relationship between fancier and cat is more complex in ongoing interactions outside the show environment.

Producing and Evaluating “Good” Cats. While benching comprises the majority of time spent at a cat show, each cat eventually enters the judging ring for a chance to earn points toward championship status. Each fancier I spoke to conceded that winning is a big deal, even those who softened the admission with credentialing disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) that they are not overly competitive. That is, fanciers acknowledged that enjoying a win may seem distasteful, but aimed to temper judgment by casting themselves as less cutthroat than other competitors. Several noted that winning an award can be an extremely emotional event, and Amelia compared the adrenaline rush of winning to that experienced by drug users: “I’ve never done heroin, but I imagine it’s a lot like heroin in a vein.”

Fanciers often referred to winning cats—i.e., those who adhere best to their breed standard—as “good” or “nice” cats, alluding to a moral value judgment aligning with findings about show dogs (Wanner 2017). Although the “good” cat confirms the breed’s identity, raising a “good” cat also confirms the breeder’s identity, as exemplified in this quote from Lily: “It’s a validation of your breeding program and the particular cat you’ve chosen to show...it’s also

wonderful that judges are recognizing our [breed].” While several elements comprise the good breeder identity, in this section, I will discuss the breeder’s skill in producing award-winning cats. Revisiting the concept of the cat fancy as a hobby, Stebbins (2015) identified six characteristics that define serious leisure. Though all six are applicable to various aspects of the cat fancy, two are especially germane to the skilled breeder. First, participants view the trajectory of the hobby as similar to that of a career—that is, they seek to gradually increase their involvement and, as a result, gain access to progressively higher levels of success. Second, they accomplish this through developing their abilities, knowledge, and experiences within the hobby.

Involvement in the cat fancy as analogous to a career was evident when my interviewees discussed the tendency of some newcomers to enter shows and become frustrated when they don’t immediately win an award. Lily described how younger generations’ expectations do not line up with the reality of time invested in the fancy:

The ones that do come in and try want immediate gratification, and a lot of us have had to work a number of years and pay our dues...in order to get our breeding program where it needed to be to have competitive cats.

Furthermore, time invested in the cat fancy career is spent honing skills that novices do not possess. For the cat fancier, this involves intimate knowledge of not only their selected breed, but the “lines” they have developed. “Lines” refer to the genetic profiles of the cats used for breeding. These are derived from the pedigrees² that document each cat’s ancestry and are continually shaped by breeders as they select for traits and temperament. Fanciers invest

²I use the term “pedigreed cat” throughout this chapter rather than “purebred” in alignment with the preference noted by one of my participants: “I don’t say purebred, because there really isn’t such a thing” (Vada). In addition, this seems to be the preferred language of both CFA and TICA.

substantial time in educating themselves on how genetics combine to determine both phenotype—physical expressions of genes—and health, as reported by Gracie:

I really, really study my genetics, and I make notes of all of the health issues that any particular cat might have, so that I know if I'm [breeding] this cat with this cat, these are colors I can get, but this is also the issues that I might have.

Alongside an understanding of genetic expression, a more ineffable talent arises in the cat fancier: an “eye” for the breed, or the ability to visually assess a cat’s adherence to the breed standard. This “skilled vision” (Grasseni 2004:41) is developed through close contact with the animal and improves over time. In addition, experience at cat shows—not only through feedback received on one’s own cats, but through observing the traits of other cats within the breed—plays an important role in the fancier’s ability to evaluate a cat’s physical quality. Shows are also important sites for gleaning information from other fanciers, as hobbyists rely upon their networks—frequently at in-person events—for informal knowledge exchange (Muka 2022). A third avenue for developing the fancier’s judgment about cat quality is observing the outcomes when breeding litters. In this way, the cat fancier can be considered a “tinkerer,” described by Muka (2022:193) as developing “knowledge produced through a combination of observational and experimental work...Tinkerers learn through continual trial and error and focus on achieving functional results over causal explanations for their success.” While a solid understanding of genetics underlies cat fanciers’ attempts to produce cats meeting certain standards, Muka asserts that academic comprehension is but one aspect of the tinkerer’s knowledge, stressing the experimental nature of practice.

Some fanciers take development of these skills to the next level and become judges at cat shows. My interviewees included four judges, who undergo extensive training and study to

qualify for the role. Hands-on experience with a variety of cats is an important component of judging program requirements. For example, to become a judge in CFA (2023), an applicant must have been either operating their own licensed cattery—or breeding facility—for five years, or been an active show exhibitor for seven. Furthermore, applicants must have a number of wins with cats they have exhibited, and have experience handling and showing several breeds within the specialty they are applying for—longhair or shorthair—and of several body types within the specialty. TICA’s training courses include instruction on handling cats, reading body language, assessing genetics, and “finding the essence of each cat,” among other skills (TICA 2018a). All judges in both associations must regularly undergo ongoing education to maintain their judging license, which is renewed yearly. Laughing, Vivienne told me about her process of applying to become a judge: “I put more into my judging application than I did into getting my [master’s degree]...it was a 350-page epic novel of all of the qualifications that we’d accomplished within the breed and other breeds.”

Judging, as Stone (2022) points out, is obviously an extremely visual activity, but also includes a great deal of tactile estimation, providing a wealth of embodied experiences for those who join the program. When Hank began assisting in the show ring, he liked to watch the judges as they evaluated cats and try to match his own appraisals to theirs. Ninety percent of the time, he found himself in agreement with the judges’ assessments: “And that 10 percent that I wasn’t on with them, I’d ask the judge later...they’d say, ‘well, the difference was picking up the body and having your hands on them.’” Evaluating cats with not only their eyes, but their hands, allows judges to assess whether the cat conforms to standards for musculature, skull shape, and other characteristics that aren’t immediately visually evident. Moreover, for Vivienne, it forges a connection that she likened to a religious experience: “I put my hands on the cat and it was like

this white noise came down. I didn't see any of the crowds out there. It was Christmas and birthdays and everything all rolled up into one.” Vivienne’s description of her judging experiences showcases not only her dedication to fairly evaluating each cat that enters the ring, but her appreciation of a “good” cat.

A purposefully refined skillset that includes knowledge of a specific cat breed and hereditary information, along with the visual and tactile acuity to determine a cat’s quality as a representative of its breed, produces pride in the fancier. Stone (2022:86) warns that focusing so heavily on aesthetics risks the ultimate culmination of time, knowledge, and skill—that is, the cat—being viewed as a “product of the breeder’s work rather than as an independent being.” Indeed, some language used by my interviewees seemed to portray the cat not as a living entity, but as an outcome of a science project. For instance, George explained:

You’re proud of the cat because of all the work you've done in...breeding it and working with the different pedigrees to breed exactly what you want to show, so you really want them to score as high as they possibly can. And when they do it, you're really proud of it because of all the work you put into it to get them there.

It is not my intention to single George out, as he was not alone in this sentiment; nor do I doubt George’s affection for his cats, as evidenced in other parts of our interview. However, his language here reduces the cat to a product of his efforts, carefully cultivated to ensure a pre-determined outcome.

This is perhaps inevitable, as producing “good” cats frames one’s standing in the fancy, where the animals’ backgrounds are rigorously recorded and preserved and include reference to who produced them. Pedigreed cats’ officially registered names include as a prefix the name of the cattery where they originated and, if they are purchased by another cattery, their new home as

a suffix (Stone 2022; Wanner 2017). For example, if I were to produce a pedigreed kitten at my (hypothetical) Jessicats cattery and sell him to the (also hypothetical) Janecats cattery, his registered name might be “Jessicats [originating cattery] Ringo Starr [cat’s registered name] of Janecats [new cattery].” Stone (2022) points out that these naming conventions are an example of breeders’ “distributed personhood” (Gell 1998:21), or the network of associations linking one’s identity with other actors, objects, and—ultimately—meaning. Indeed, this practice demonstrates that breeders of quality cats want to extend their selves to the products of their efforts—not necessarily for the public’s benefit, however, as new potential cat buyers will likely have little idea of the worth of one cattery versus another. Rather, it carries importance for repeat buyers, but more so for the fancy community itself, where name recognition and reputation for quality carry significant weight. In addition, amending the suffix of the cat’s purchaser, assuming they too are in the fancy, highlights the significance of trust among this group, as linking one’s name capital with another breeder signifies approval of their program, practices, and cats.

The identity work performed at shows and in the business of breeding cats does, indeed, seem to serve anthropocentric purposes such as person-to-person socialization; facilitating human desires to admire other animals; and creating the best “products” possible. However, fanciers contend that this work is done in the service of the cat, a creature they love and admire deeply. The emotional aspect of fanciers’ relationships with cats may be expected to develop as a result of private interactions rather than inside the hobbyist space, where behavior is dictated by a set of norms. As Wheeler and Bechler (2021:6) argue, “Public meaning is shared due to socialization and enculturation, private meaning is formed by personal experiences with the object.” Here, the authors refer to objects, a distinction I purposely sought given the propensity for commodification in the show environment. Evaluation of the cat’s body, careful planning to

maximize genetic potential, and scaffolding one's identity on the rungs of serious leisure—not to mention the inherent motivations of competition—encourage cat fanciers to use reductive language in the show arena. However, in describing caregiving interactions, fanciers used much of the same language that men in this study did, most notably, in parental or familial terms—thus transforming the cat to a subject.

Caregiving

Breeding. When I asked participants about the activities surrounding breeding, most jumped to describing what I suspect is the moment of peak excitement: birthing kittens. While a few mentioned sending their females to be bred with a male, I can only speculate on why interviewees may have been circumspect about the topic, subconsciously or otherwise. Participants may have assumed I have a basic understanding of how the process works for selecting breeding partners based on pedigree, preferred characteristics, and—as noted in the preceding section on reputation—quality. Stemming directly from these factors, discussing the process not only invites judgment about controlling the reproductive cat's sexuality, but risks a sense of sterility that belies the beautiful moment of birth. Miranda described it as analogous to becoming a mother herself: “It's sort of like being a mother all over again, going through the birthing process.” For others, mothering manifests in assisting with the birth, acting as a midwife. Vivienne described the process: “I'm the first thing that touches them as they come into the world, before their mother, even...I'm the one pulling them out and cleaning them off and then giving them to their mother.” This immediate bonding, Vivienne believes, cements her as a mother figure in her kittens' eyes, a relationship that continually develops as she raises them.

Raising Kittens and Facilitating Adoption. After a litter is born, fanciers view their role as raising the kittens for the buyers to whom they've been promised. This places breeders into a

surrogate parent role as they perform all of the same duties they would if the cat were remaining in their home. One major aspect of raising kittens is socializing them to humans. Amelia talked about how her buyers have remarked that the cats she raises are extremely friendly: “I always handle my kittens from birth. My kittens get touched and kissed every day from the time they’re born.” Ensuring kittens remain safe and healthy is another chief parenting task, often involving assistance from others. Miranda talked about enlisting her human kids’ help when she has newborn kittens: “You can’t just up and leave. You have to have a babysitter to take care of them.” Hank, echoing a favored phrase by my veterinarian interviewees, noted the dedication necessary to raise kittens well:

Cats are not little dogs...cats aren't even weaned until eight weeks. And their immune system is not strong enough to be on their own until they're four months old. So when you raise cats, you've got a four-month commitment to get those kittens ready for anywhere.

But the kittens born in these catteries don’t end up just anywhere. Many of my participants commented that they maintain a waiting list such that any kitten born in their cattery has a home awaiting their arrival. Furthermore, not everybody who expresses interest in joining the waiting list will receive a kitten. Gracie described the process of her own personal “adoption studies”:

One of the things on my contract that's required is pictures of their home inside and out, and reference letters from their veterinarian, and a reference letter from somebody they've known for a long time...I want to see if you have electrical wires somewhere or a plant that is poisonous, or something that's not safe, and you can correct anything that I come to.

Even after initial approval to join a waiting list, buyers sometimes reveal information that results in removal. Miranda told a story about a woman who had been on her waiting list for two years:

We went to see her, and thank God...she texted me and said, "I want to apologize. My husband and I were up all night drinking, so I'm still kind of drunk, just want you to know." And I wouldn't have sold her a cat because when I got there, she was so out of it...it was just so bizarre. I'm thinking, how can I give this woman two of my cats?

As a result of the relational involvement detailed in the preceding paragraphs, several participants remarked that the emotional bonds developed while raising kittens were difficult to break in the beginning. Fern recalled the first litter of kittens that she sold: "I can remember...our first litter that we bred, my daughter and I...and I remember just bawling. We both cried and cried as [the buyer] left." Fern realized that if she was to remain a breeder, she would need to come to peace with detaching from the kittens in her care. She was given the hands-on opportunity to learn by raising a litter of kittens born at her mentor's cattery: "Before that, I was always so emotionally attached to them; but if I was in the mindset that those kittens were not going to stay with us, then I could adopt them out." Mara evoked a similarly emotional experience when her first litter left home, but remarked on how she has come to view the experience as one of joy:

The minute I can pair them and match them with their owners, it's like I'm raising your kitten for you; this is your kitten...as much as I love the kitten, this is your kitten. I'm not tempted to keep it and I can't wait for you to get your kitten...I text with my people daily or every other day, and I'm just super excited to give you this gift.

However, many participants noted that sending a kitten to their new home is not the end of the relationship with their cats.

Parent/Grandparent Relationship. Eleven out of my sixteen participants—both those who have human children and those who don't—referred to their cats as their children. Vivienne described her relationships with her cats as “pretty much everything at this point. To me they're the reason to wake up in the morning and take care of something...I would protect them with my life.” For many of my interviewees, parental identification also extends to the cats who were produced in their catteries, then left for another home. This relationship entails emotional involvement and protectiveness throughout the lifespan. Mara shared a devastating situation befalling one of her cats:

One of my cats died last week fairly suddenly of FIP [feline infectious peritonitis], a very horrible disease. And I was on the phone in tears with the owners...because that's still my baby...they're like my children that have gone off into the world, but I still always feel responsible for them.

Other fanciers consider the cats their grandchildren and embody the role of the doting grandparent. Gracie remarked, “When they leave to go to other people's homes, I am the granny and I expect pictures and stories <laugh> throughout their lifetime.” Another grandparental role that fanciers inhabit is expert parent. Even in cats' advanced age, guardians reach out to breeders for guidance, as Fern related: “I'm also advice as these cats get older...When they become fatally ill, it's hard...I'm able to counsel them through that.” Finally, like many a grandparent who has raised a grandchild, several fanciers reported that the cats their catteries have produced will always have a home with them. Reflecting on mismatches between cats and new guardians, Bea affirmed, “That's where I come back. I take my cats back anytime.” Mara related that her contact

information remains on cats' microchips so that, should a cat who originated at her cattery be lost, she is able to be reached.

One notable exception to creating close relationships arose in my data, and I suspect it may be a common experience. In her study of dog fanciers, Wanner (2017:128) observed “a distance which enables a view of the animal as a member of its breed,” in which breeders purposefully maintain a distant relationship with their breeding dogs. Wanner’s research took place among dog breeders, whose kennel practices likely differ from those of cat fanciers. Most of my interviewees reported that their cats live in their houses, with free rein and no cages. In contrast, the breeders that Wanner described housed their dogs in outdoor kennels, which are separate buildings from the family home. This imposed physical distance likely results in more instrumental views of the dogs, and thus increases the likelihood that dogs will be viewed as members of their breeds rather than as individuals. Similarly, cat fanciers who do keep their breeding cats separate from the home likely eschew the same close relationship with these cats in contrast to cats who live among the family. Still, for the cats who do live in the family home, a tension may emerge between their role as a companion and/or family member and their function as a model representative of their breed. For example, Mara keeps her breeding queens (females) in her home, but knowing that she will eventually retire them and adopt them out creates a desire within her to remain somewhat detached:

The breeding cats I love and adore, but I try to keep a little bit of an emotional distance from them if I can. Sometimes it's hard. I've got one right now I know that's going to be really hard when she leaves.

Mara struggles between creating a close relationship with these cats as individuals and knowing they are eventually going to leave her home. Her wish to construct these cats according to their

purpose conflicts with the personal relationships she shares with her other cats. This friction is likely very pronounced among those whose breeding cats go on to live with other families once they have sired or birthed their final litter.

Fanciers develop attunement with their cats through embodied experiences in both the show environment and the home. While relational exchanges in the private sphere most often lead to attunement characterized by reciprocal relationships, affinity with one's chosen breed develops through a combination of socialization in the hobby and recognition of individual cats as subjects.

ATTUNEMENT

Affinity for Breed

Almost every fancier I spoke with dedicates themselves to one breed that they prefer showing, raising, and living with. Some had lived with cats of multiple breeds and ultimately decided to devote themselves to their favorite; others have remained committed to the breed of their first pedigreed cat. Some chose to work with several breeds out of interest and attraction; for others, it was a requirement to advance in the fancy—recall that judges, for example, must work with a variety of breeds to qualify for a license. Interviewees spoke with reverence about their chosen breed, and their narratives conferred an intangible essence between person and cat—a sense of falling in love, as some participants described it, or of intimate compatibility. Vivienne described her moment with her chosen breed as a meeting between two subjects: “I'd had cats all my life, and I'd loved cats all my life. And then we got our first [breed], and it changed everything, because when they look at you, there's someone looking back.” Similarly, fanciers discussed breeds that they do *not* prefer. Rafe talked about his experience with a particularly boisterous breed: “Me and [breed] don't get along...they're...wild and extroverts, whereas I like

the cats that are a little bit more introvert, quiet kind of thinker. You end up finding...cats that match your soul and who you are.”

Alongside the more elusive aspects of their relationships, fanciers experience attunement through intimate familiarity with their chosen breeds, giving them the ability to understand their cats’ specific needs and intentions. Understanding the physical characteristics of a breed is one aspect of knowledge. Cat fanciers thoroughly study breed standards, alongside pedigrees and genetics, such that a fancier knows all acceptable, and probable, eye colors, coat textures, and ear placement, among other traits. They also know which diseases and disorders their breed is susceptible to, and carefully curate their lines so that disease is not passed to future generations. Furthermore, they know about any special physical needs their breed may have, such as protection from the sun for cats without a protective coat. A breed’s physical and genetic characteristics can be somewhat objectively observed, though undoubtedly breed standards are interpreted subjectively and best understood in relative terms. However, a breed’s collective behavioral identity is constructed through experience with both individual cats and through enculturation in the world of the fancy. That is, breed temperament descriptions are carefully cultivated and disseminated, creating expectations for their behavior.

When I asked interviewees why they prefer their chosen breed, over half described their cats as friendly or people-oriented, and one-quarter of participants referred to their cats as playful or active. Nearly half of participants stressed their breed’s affectionate nature, and an equal number talked about how intelligent their breed is compared to others. Vivienne humorously acknowledged the tendency of fanciers to describe their breed as intelligent: “I listen to every breeder...describe their breed, and I do a lot of editing on our breed brochures. I kind of chuckle because everyone says their breed is intelligent.” Interestingly, nearly one-third of my

participants described their cats as dog-like in temperament, language that I suggest some cat admirers, particularly those with socially contested identities, deploy as an aligning action: a rhetorical device to distance themselves from deviance (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Labeling these specific qualities as markers of breed identity indicates that these are the “ideal” traits that people seek out in their feline companions. As such, fanciers tie these attributes to breed identity and select for temperament when breeding their cats, creating a mostly predictable, if imperfect, alignment to the breed they are already attuned to living with. Cassidy (2009) warns that breeders’ focus on the genealogical model is reductionist and risks erasure of the individual. The propensity to view cats as individuals while simultaneously aiming to produce cats with specific behavioral traits is undeniably a paradox of the cat fancy (Stone 2022).

Individuality. Many of my participants spoke of individual cats’ personalities, in essence challenging the idea that personality can be inherited. I suspect that many breeders would chalk this up to variation, as Bea did: “Even though I select for disposition, they’re not all going to have the disposition that I select for.” Participants also alluded to individuality within their cats by noting and honoring their preferences for participating in shows. Some may argue that removing a cat from the show ring is self-serving, because cats are partially judged on temperament. Additionally, Stone (2022:74) posited that agency in the show ring can work both for and against cats:

Even when judgements are thought to be made entirely according to the breed standard there will likely be instances where expressions of agency may influence a judge’s decision. For instance, a cat who purrs and head bunts the judge, rolls over, or generally demonstrates affiliative behaviours may create a more positive evaluation compared with a cat who hisses or bites.

However, several of my interviewees spoke of recognizing their cats' preferences to show or not and framed it as respecting their boundaries. For instance, Lily talked about a cat who began to show signs of irritation in the show arena: "We didn't show him anymore because I don't really like or agree with showing a kitty that doesn't want to be there. Like I said, they're my family, and that comes first." Lily's positioning of the cat as a family member with his own desires speaks not only to her attunement with his intentions, but to reciprocity in their relationship, another aspect of attunement.

Reciprocity

Many participants again spoke of their cats in similar ways to the men in this study regarding establishing relationships based on mutuality. A reciprocal relationship between person and cat emerged such that when I asked about his relationship with his cat, Rafe told me while laughing, "My friends would say we're one and the same." In much the same way as men in this study, participants perceive their cats as providing emotional support in return for the care they are given. George detailed how his cats seem to know when he would benefit from their attention: "If you're not feeling well, they'll come up and try to get in your lap and rub their heads up against you, try to get you to pet 'em and get you out of your blue funk." Amelia described a sense of "doing right" by her cats, as rewarded by their affection:

I could have had the world's most stressful day and if I'm just laying there and someone's on me purring and just looking at me with such love and adoration, I'm like, I've done something good today; I swear I have.

Fanciers also respect that cats are more hesitant and do not trust strangers simply because they are approached. Much like both men and veterinarians, they appreciate the opportunity to build

relationships with cats on mutual terms. Vivienne reflected, “You have to earn their trust and you have to earn their loyalty. But once you have it, it’s undying.”

Though breed identities are at least partially constructed in the social world of the cat fancy, it is clear that personal relationships with cats also feed into conceptualizing them as both individuals and breed representatives. Experiences inside and outside the hobby foster in cat fanciers a desire to protect and guide the future of their chosen breeds. In the first identity transformation they experience—self in relation to cat breed—fanciers view themselves as guardians and advocates.

PERSONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: SELF IN RELATION TO CAT BREED

Guardian and Advocate for Breed

Unlike my other interviewees, Rafe was less dedicated to one specific breed, but noted that he feels that fanciers have a “unique take on owning cats,” one that recognizes “the value of preserving all the different breeds we have.” Rafe’s language of preservation was a consistent thread among respondents. The vast majority of participants in the current study identified themselves as a guardian or protector of their chosen breed, dedicated to safeguarding its heritage and nurturing its continuation. For some, this positionality is cemented in an official function within the fancy, such as member or leader of a breed committee. Others who are not involved in an official capacity feel no less passionate about maintaining a standard for the breed, whether they perceive changes are necessary or are content with the status quo. While love and admiration for the breed emerged as the consistent underlying motivation for preservation, respondents enumerated additional reasons for undertaking this role.

Standard and Health. Many fanciers referred to the importance of maintaining their breed’s standard. Several interviewees remarked that their standard hasn’t changed in years;

others reported shepherding their breed committees through proposed changes. Mara's committee recently thoroughly reworked their standards to eliminate ambiguity:

We went through the standard and clarified it, expanded everything so that a new breeder could actually read it and follow it and know what we want... We've been painstakingly working on it for well over a year. That's a big project that we've done that I'm really proud of because I think it's important to preserve the [breed].

The authority to guide breed development, especially for breeds that have undergone many changes or that were not initially officially recognized, may confer a sense of ownership among their proponents. For example, Miranda detailed the labor she performed to have her breed accepted into her organization: "I love the breed because they're mine and I sort of own it, and I did so much work with them. That's why I would never switch to another breed."

While breed standards overwhelmingly emphasize physical appearance, many contain reference to temperament, even if only fleetingly. For purposes of the show ring, cats must be, at minimum, amenable to handling, as aggression can disqualify the cat from future shows. Regardless, several participants used the term "beauty contest" in admission that the show world overwhelmingly values aesthetics. This language is significant, as it acknowledges an uncomfortable truth: cat shows are sites of "visual consumption" that entertain audiences, lending themselves to "commercial and voyeuristic angle[s]" (Stone 2019:387). Moreover, as King-O'Riain (2008:75) points out, beauty queens are "shaped, selected, and even *produced* within the social context of the institution of the beauty pageant...[they] are not only places where queens are chosen but where they are *made*" (emphasis original). Indeed, the pedigreed cat is not only *made*, but *produced*, through the authority of the breed standard—a document crafted, modified, and enforced by humans. Here, the potentially problematic language of

ownership and commodification again emerges, with the cat fancier's public identity hinging directly on their ability to produce an aesthetically pleasing—even if also temperamentally appealing—specimen. Undeniably, producing “good” cats confirms the good breeder identity, as “The cat as an aesthetic ‘object’ becomes a marker of the breeder’s skill in a similar way to a piece of art acting as an ‘index’ of the artist’s skill” (Stone 2022:71). In this way, guardianship of the breed standard also becomes guardianship of one’s own accomplishments.

Some participants also discussed the benefits of protecting the breed standard in terms of eliminating disease to the extent possible in their cats. Lily noted that she wants her buyers to alert her of any health issues in the cats they’ve purchased from her: “That helps me with my breeding program because if [I get] a number of calls and I can trace it back to a specific cat, I know that I don't want to use that line anymore.” Suitably armed with health knowledge, breeders can improve their cats’ genetic profiles. They can also operate as gatekeepers for others who want to use their cats for outcrossing, or breeding genes from one line into another. Outcrossing may be used to introduce a new trait into a breed or to increase genetic diversity within a breed, and each standard specifies allowable outcrosses. Gracie related a story about serving as a protector of her breed’s health when another leader approached her council for permission to outcross:

A few years ago there was another breed that wanted to use our cats, and it was not going to be healthy...They didn't quite get that, so I started outlining the defects in their bloodlines and the defects in our bloodlines. If put together, it would cause extra defects in the cats and it would be very, very detrimental to their development.

Here, Gracie is able to not only influence the current generation of cats in her care, but also protect the breed as a whole from association with potentially unhealthy descendants.

Part of advocating for one's breed is serving as an ambassador on its behalf. Graham talked about the show arena as being a great place for visitors to learn about and appreciate cats: "The spectators roam around to the different kitties and look at the different breeds and learn about them and how to care for them...maybe furthering their love for cats as well." Both organizations have ambassador programs, where breeders and cats are accessible to attendees who wish to have a hands-on experience. Interaction with spectators and the ambassador program not only benefit visitors, but fanciers as well, as it provides an opportunity for them to enthuse about their breed's desirable characteristics and display the depth of their knowledge, confirming the good breeder identity as well as the breed advocate identity.

These identities also manifest when fanciers see the fruits of their labors in promoting their breed. For example, Vivienne took great pride in her efforts to raise the profile of her breed and reveled in her accomplishments:

We took it from a fairly rare breed that was rarely recognized to one of the top winning breeds...I learned that I could share that with people around the world, and I've been instrumental in getting the breed started in numerous countries...which was important to me.

Sharing her breed with enthusiastic fanciers worldwide and establishing their successful reproduction in areas where they were previously unrecognized confirms Vivienne's identity as a guardian of the breed's success.

History. After cats are divided into breeds, further distinctions designate how the breed arose. Vada educated me about how three distinct types of cat breeds originate: "Some are

naturally occurring breeds...we have hybrid breeds...you breed one breed to another breed to get a third breed. And then we have the mutations.”³ Some fanciers took pride in continuation of naturally occurring breeds specifically, feeling that doing so was an important part of historical preservation. Vivienne explained:

We're preserving history. We're preserving something that is very, very precious. If we don't have people working on it as breeders and doing a good job with it, we lose something that is unique and special. And that would be a really sad thing, because while I may not be as passionate about the manmade breeds, the breeds that have been around for years and years and years...millennia...that's a real tragedy when we lose any species⁴.

Natalia felt that the motives of those preserving natural breeds and those producing hybrid breeds or furthering breeds with mutations may be different: “I don't want to frown upon people making other breeds, but it's like, ‘what's the next best thing to make me money?’ And that's not what I'm in this for.” Crafting an ethical dichotomy between “natural” and “manmade” breeds strikes me as somewhat disingenuous for, as Wanner (2017) explains, both nature and breeder guide breed development. Humans, Wanner contends, take over where nature left off—presumably, with each breed ideally suited to its environment—with the aim of preserving it in this moment of time.

The breed guardian/advocate identity develops as a result of close attunement with and attachment to a specific breed and in turn allows confirmation of the good breeder identity. Next, I will describe another aspect of the cat fancier identity: definition of the self in relation to other

³Some cat breeds, such as the LaPerm, were created when spontaneous genetic mutations expressed as unusual physical traits in kittens. These mutations were propagated through purposeful breeding and became the defining characteristics of newly formed breeds.

⁴At the risk of being pedantic, it is important to note that breeds are not equivalent to species, or even subspecies. All domestic cat breeds fall under the same species designation, *Felis catus*.

cat admirers and society as a whole. Cat fanciers are part of a unique network of relationships with cats as its central hub.

SOCIAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: SELF IN RELATION TO OTHER CAT PEOPLE AND SOCIETY

Other Cat People

Buyers. As purchasing a cat from a breeder with a waiting list may be an expensive, multi-year process, people who purchase pedigreed cats from a CFA- or TICA-affiliated cattery do not make the decision on a whim. In the course of waiting for a litter to be born; preparing for the kitten's arrival while they are weaned and socialized; and engaging in follow-up communications once the kitten is living with them, some buyers become very close with the breeder and purchase multiple cats over time. Mara talked about a couple who she considers her second parents: "I have a couple who adopted from my very first litter...we are super close. They're now on cat number eight from me." The trust these buyers place in her skill confirms Mara's identity as a good breeder. In addition, it signifies the meaningful role her cats have played in this couple's life. Several participants described the great satisfaction they derive from bringing joy to their buyers. Fern described it as

... the most fulfilling thing I do. When you see a family come through your door and there are tears as they see their kittens, there's nothing more fulfilling than that. You are bringing in a family member to them. And as those tears roll down the faces, there's nothing quite like it in the world.

Bea, remembering the significant role that animals played in her own childhood, works with children who wish to purchase a cat from her:

A couple times a year, if there's a child who wants to own a cat, they have to work with their parents to earn \$50...it's between them and their parents...but it has to

be the child's money. They can buy a cat from me for \$50. And it really can make a lot of difference in somebody's life, particularly a young person's life.

In addition to facilitating the human-cat relationship, building reputation and trust also plays a large role in maintaining a breeder's legacy. As such, they often make arrangements to continue their breeding programs after they pass away. Lily told a story about her mentor, now deceased, whose genetic lines live on through Lily's cattery:

A lot of my buyers are repeats...[my mentor]...passed away in 2017 and left her cattery to me. So a lot of people are coming to me at this point and saying, "I lost my kitty...that I got from [mentor]...and I want another one."

In continuing to use her mentor's lines after her death, Lily not only maintains the breeder's reputation in the fancy; of significance to the concept of preserving history, she carries forward the genetic project that her mentor established.

Fellow Exhibitors. Fellow hobbyists also help to shape the cat fancier identity. As in any subculture, a shared identity, along with common goals and interests, facilitates enculturation into the cat fancy's norms, language, and values (Green and Jones 2005; Harrington and Fine 2000). The shared cat fancier identity is the locus for building relationships, many of which flourish into a thriving group for social support both within and outside the show hall. Hank emphasized the feeling of community sparked by spending weekends with many of the same competitors: "More than likely, wherever you go, you're going to know somebody. And even if you don't, you're going to meet new people and you automatically have cats in common because that's where you are." At cat shows, fellow exhibitors serve as an important source of assistance for their friends—for example, helping others groom cats, making food runs, and serving as a second set of ears to hear which cats are due in which ring. In addition, they support each other

emotionally, partaking in both celebration and commiseration, as Vada described: “Sometimes we’ll say, ‘Are you the bug or the windshield this weekend?’ [Looking defeated] ‘Ugh, bug.’” Participants also reported spending time together outside of the cat fancy, extending these bonds beyond the sphere of the hobby; they reported attending each other’s weddings, traveling together, and hosting barbeques and game nights, among other activities.

Several interviewees described fellow exhibitors as family and ascribed specific familial roles to their friends. Ayla noted, “I have made friends who I consider sisters. And even if all of my cats disappeared tomorrow, I would still be reaching out to them.” Vada, who has been participating in the fancy since the late 1970s, views herself as a grandmother figure to some younger competitors: “It was just so much fun being benched with these kids. And the one, I said, ‘I could be your grandma’...My other grandchild is on her way to [a show in] Texas right now...sending pictures and stuff like that.” Like any family, disagreements may arise and cause tension, though the close-knit nature of the relationships means solidarity when all is said and done. As Hank explained,

One of my favorite sayings is nobody's quite as catty as cat people. And it is true, and it can take lots of forms, but it's like a family. You may claw and hiss at each other at various times, but if a tragedy occurs, your cat friends will be there.

Mentors. In addition to friend and family relationships with fellow competitors, mentors play important roles in the cat fancy, serving as not only sources of expertise, but as a conduit for entry into what many of my interviewees lamented as an exclusive, unwelcoming hobby. Ayla told me about her attempts to find information about starting a breeding program, many of which were buffeted or outright ignored. When she finally established contact with the person who is now her mentor, she asked why it was so difficult to break into the hobby: “She explained to me,

I came in from left field, nobody knew me, I don't have a reputation...I had no idea how tight-knit this group was because they care so much about their animals.” In this way, fanciers can serve as bulwarks against people they deem irresponsible breeders or not serious about the hobby (Syrjälä 2016). In addition to avoiding association with irresponsible breeding, Vada disclosed that fanciers are, in line with breed guardianship and ownership, protective of their cats’ genetic profiles and their own labor: “You need to protect your lines. You worked hard to develop your lines.” Thus, agreeing to serve as a mentor is an enormous statement of trust and confidence in associating one’s reputation with a mentee, much as it is with linking to another cattery in the pedigree record.

Buyers, fellow exhibitors, and mentors become close friends and extended family who contribute to the fancier identity in a variety of ways. One such function is to insulate fanciers from society, which levels a host of critiques at them related to breeding and negative stigma. This allows them to maintain identities as good breeders and well-adjusted members of society.

Societal Disdain

Judgment for Breeding. Some of my participants—bemoaning the “greying” of the hobby—remarked that breeding is unpopular among younger people, a fact they attribute to the hobby’s time commitment and cost. However, societal scorn for breeding cats mostly arises from the dismaying reality that animal shelters take in millions of unhomed cats each year. In 2023, approximately 3.3 million cats entered shelters; of those, 330,000, or 10 percent, were euthanized (Shelter Animals Count 2024). As a result of this negative appraisal, fanciers feel misunderstood in their aims and reluctant to reveal that they participate in breeding. Speaking generally, Rafe noted that he tries to deflect disapproval by utilizing “appeals for the suspension of judgment”

(Hewitt and Stokes 1975:5): “I will often frame it and be like, ‘All right, well, don’t judge, but I breed cats.’”

Fanciers also sense contempt from specific groups of people. For example, Englar, Schettler, and Ostrom (2021) found that nearly one-third of cat breeders perceived that veterinarians disapprove of breeding. Some of their feelings of alienation stemmed from veterinarians promoting adoption in their offices, a trend that Mara remarked on: “Part of the reason I’m hesitant to say I’m a breeder is because of all the push for the ‘adopt, don’t shop’ mentality.” Furthermore, they contend, veterinarians don’t understand the impetus behind breeding. Rafe described a talk he gave to a group of veterinarians:

It was challenging because a lot of them were like, “Why purebred cats? That just seems irresponsible to be breeding cats that might not find homes.” And I’m like, well, it becomes about preservation of unique breeds and different traits.

Furthermore, participants reported negativity from people they described as activists. Again, they attribute this derision to misunderstanding the purpose of breeding. Fern discussed feeling uncomfortable bringing a litter of kittens to the waiting room of her veterinarian’s office, where she was questioned by other visitors:

You can just see the look on their faces. You try to explain to them, “I am preserving this breed,” and they just can’t understand it. “Well, there are too many animals out there that just need to be adopted” and that type of thing. They just don’t understand the structure of preserving an animal and a breed.

Nor do United States lawmakers understand this intent, according to some interviewees, as they are subject to influence from activists who want to limit the number of animals in people’s

homes. This legislation, they contend, would make breeders' operations untenable⁵. George felt strongly that these laws would be harmful to ensuring continuation of breeds:

They've passed laws that say you can only have so many cats...it's primarily those types of laws have been passed due to activities of the outfits like PETA and Humane Society and a few others. They're getting close to starting to drive people out of breeding, and as soon as that happens, you're not going to be able to find the pedigree cats anymore.

These sentiments are echoed by CFA (2024b)⁶, which characterizes the laws as “punitive toward people who selectively breed to preserve the desirable personality and appearance traits of pedigreed cats.”

More nuance did surface, however, in discussing derision from animal rescuers. Some interviewees conceded that they understand why this population holds great contempt for *irresponsible* breeders who produce litter after litter with no regard for pedigrees, health, or the futures of their kittens. Natalia, who worked with several animal rescues before entering the cat fancy, commented:

They hate breeders, really hate them. And I understand; you've got people out there that just breed to breed, and kitten mills, puppy mills, of course. But I'm not a person that's just going to do it to breed. It's too much work.

Wanner (2017:137) posits that “The pedigree project is about ethical self-making, in which good breeders develop both virtue and virtuosity in the course of their practice.” Virtuosity is achieved

⁵Laws governing the number of animals in a home are generally enacted by individual municipalities (Hodges 2010). It is unclear if and how hobby breeders are regulated under these statutes, though other laws—such as those restricting large-scale breeding—may exempt hobbyists (Milot 2018).

⁶TICA also opposes legislation limiting the number of animals in private homes (TICA 2018b).

through careful study of breed standards, genetics, and development of finely-tuned visual skills. Virtue, on the other hand, plays a role when fanciers conceive of themselves as breed guardians and advocates. Both virtue and virtuosity also materialized in discussion of what good breeders are *not*, as participants fervently sought to distance themselves from careless breeders.

Fox (2009:102) asserted that “Successful pedigree breeding requires a degree of expertise and technical knowledge and inescapably ties even ethical and caring breeders to those who do it more exploitatively.” Unfortunately, companion animal breeding is rife with exploitation. Many are familiar with the existence of puppy mills, or commercial mass breeding facilities that produce a large number of dogs for profit, with little regard to the animals’ health or welfare. Kitten mills are less in the public eye, but as the New York State Humane Association (2022) reported, “Kitten mills are a carbon copy of all the negative aspects of puppy mills.” Further adding to the pool of available kittens are amateur, or “backyard” breeders who are not associated with a large-scale operation, but individually breed and sell cats for profit. These cats are generally “purebred” in the sense that they have the physical characteristics of a given breed, but they are not associated with a genetic registry. To the contrary, amateur breeders generally know little about their breeding cats’ ancestry. As these breeders are not associated with any oversight body, regulation is scarce; thus, cat care, health, and socialization vary greatly.

My participants took great care to distance themselves from backyard breeders, pushing back against the notion that their activities in any way equate to irresponsibility and protecting their good breeder identity. First and foremost, they defended breeding of pedigreed cats as a principled, purpose-driven venture. In alignment with their identities as breed guardians, fanciers view their catteries as part of a historical project. Preservation and improvement of breeds are the paramount—and only—justifications for breeding, according to Vada: “The only reason you

breed is to preserve the breed better...It's the only reason you should be breeding." Therefore, in line with the findings of Gillespie and colleagues (2002) concerning pedigreed dogs, profit should not be a motive for a "good" breeder. Interviewees stressed that they do not make money from breeding, and in fact, lose money due to costs such as show registrations and unanticipated veterinarian bills. Making money, Hank argued, can only be due to negligence: "The only way you can make money raising cats is to do it incorrectly: a wall of cages, you don't have 'em socialized, and you try and move them as fast as you can." Mara, in contrast to this portrait of inattention, observed that her purposeful efforts are responsible for the existence of her cats, which makes her all the more mindful of their well-being: "Every one of them right now in my house, I brought into this world...and that makes me feel responsible for them even more, I think." Fanciers also touted the backing of their own reputations and respective organizations in a rhetorical appeal to authority. Speaking of the benefits of buying from a reputable breeder, Vada stressed that, "When you buy a kitten from a respectable breeder, you're buying a reputation, their years in the fancy. So if something goes south with that kitten, among other things, you have [organization] to advocate for you."

In addition, cat fanciers disputed their role in contributing to overpopulation, noting that, in contrast to backyard breeders, all of their kittens have pre-arranged homes. Furthermore, they work with buyers to ensure a good fit, and they take any unwanted cats back⁷. Despite their conviction that they are not responsible for the plight of unhomed cats, a few fanciers made remarks refuting the idea that they are callous to cats who are not pedigreed, or who are in need of adoption. Many spoke of the household pet competition within their shows, which accepts cats of any origin to compete for awards. Others spoke about the fancy's role in promoting rescue and

⁷Some purchase contracts stipulate that if a cat is unwanted at any time, they *must* be returned to the breeder. However, it is unclear how breeders will know if this agreement is broken.

cat welfare organizations. When I asked what she would want outsiders to the fancy to know about her, Lily commented, “We do support, and most of us...have rescue cats...some of my friends in the cat fancy have run spay, trap, neuter programs. We feel a definite responsibility to helping rescue cats and rescue organizations.” Ayla confessed that she still struggles with spending her money on pedigreed cats and the fancy, situating her feelings in the notion of karma:

I had to come to terms with...paying money for a cat that I could spend on my rescue cats, or even donate to people who rescue cats. So I felt like there was a karma debt...I've also considered putting aside a tithe and maybe donating money to the animal shelter to help cover spays and neuters in the area.

In noting these conflicts of conscience—and in emphasizing the good that the fancy can do for cats in unfortunate situations—fanciers draw on the metaphor of the ledger (Klockars 1974), in which perceived positive and negative actions balance each other out in the metaphorical record of one’s lifelong acts. In addition to the controversial act of breeding cats, fanciers struggle with other negative stigma, sometimes in relation to the hobby, and sometimes simply due to their association with cats.

Stigma. “Adopting a particular technical identity can produce social categorizations, just as ethnic, class, religious, and national identities produce social categorizations” (Haring 2007:8). Here, Haring speaks of the technological identities that ham radio operators integrate into their selves; however, the base concept that identity adoption influences social standing remains relevant across contexts and is certainly applicable to the cat fancy. Most of my participants acknowledged that people don’t understand their devotion to the hobby and characterize them as eccentric because of it. Laughing, Natalia told me that she knows she is

perceived as “absolutely batshit crazy, okay?” Others echoed this response, and some admitted that they hide the cat fancier identity because of it. Bea, for instance, talked about how she sometimes withholds this aspect of her self: “When I'm working with a client [at my job], the first thing out of my mouth usually is not that I raise and show [breed], because that's looked upon as being kind of strange.” Hank, referring to the movie *Best in Show*, maintained that all people engaged in an animal-based hobby are stereotyped this way: “Although concentrated, every one of those characters exists somewhere in the cat fancy, or the dog fancy, or horses...my mom raised llamas; it was there as well.” Dashper (2017) and Gillespie and colleagues (2002) confirmed Hank’s suspicion that those in horse and dog hobbies, respectively, are looked upon as peculiar. As Baldwin and Norris (1999:11) noted about dog fanciers, “Translating the pursuit to those outside the subculture was just too difficult.” In fact, many participants in serious leisure activities feel misunderstood by family, friends, and others for various reasons related to, for example, lifestyle (Anderson and Taylor 2010), gender (Stalp and Conti 2011), and social commitments (Kennelly, Moyle, and Lamont 2013).

I suspect that cat fanciers endure an additional layer of stigma due to society’s aversion to, and stereotypes about, cats. For instance, Mara explained that she has to guard against earning the “crazy cat lady” moniker:

My home has cats and has cat trees, and I have some awards hanging in one room, but I don't want that stereotype. And I'm not that person either. I love my cats, but I don't need to be dressed in leopard print from head to toe <laugh>.

Furthermore, cat fanciers are sometimes equated to hoarders due to the number of cats in their home. Several participants mentioned that they are frequently asked how many cats they have, which they find tiresome—and perhaps, given the push for legislation to limit the number of

animals in homes, threatening to their hobby and a facet of their self-concept. Another stereotype relates to the smell of fanciers' homes. Ayla told a story about her experience at a recent show:

The last cat show that we were in, my mom was sitting there and a man walked behind her and said to the woman he was walking with, "Can you imagine what these people's houses smell like?" So there's a stigma attached, and I feel like we're very aware of that stigma.

Pushing back against this notion, George conceded that a fancier's home may smell like cats, but it doesn't signify that they are unsanitary: "You can't have cats without having your house smell like cats. I'll tell you that right now. But you keep it clean and you scoop their litter boxes and take care of them."

Some outsiders may construe the cat hobbyist as self-obsessed or participating for reasons of self-aggrandizement. My participants were quick to distance themselves from fanciers who are overly competitive. When I asked her what she would change about the cat fancy, Natalia elaborated on cutthroat exhibitors: "A lot of it is obsession with winning...win at all costs. 'I must have a win every single weekend; I must have an award every single year.' It really takes the wind out of it to obsess over that." Fern discussed helping fellow competitors with grooming tips, revealing that "there are some exhibitors that are not willing to share that," which she considers antithetical to a friendly show atmosphere. Miranda, noting the political nature of the competition, believes that some people make connections with judges to advance their show career: "Somebody that's friendlier with a judge and wants to make it their identity to go to every single cat show and have the cat show be their life is going to get more recognition probably than somebody else." Other fanciers decried exhibitors who refer to themselves winning awards rather than their cats. Hank explained, "It's not you getting the award; it's your cat." Vada

elaborated from the point of view of somebody whose cats did not win any awards: “It’s very real and very ugly sometimes. ‘That judge dumped me. That judge failed to use my cat.’ Well, *you* weren’t in the cage.” This attitude is unsurprising, given earlier analysis of building one’s reputation in the fancy through producing “good” cats. In early social psychological scholarship, William James (1890) documented that other individuals become part of what Belk (1988:139, 156) later referred to as “the extended self,” which he notes “can involve a demeaning objectification of these other persons.” Hence, entanglement between the purpose of the hobby and the desire to create an intersubjective relationship often results in contradictory characterization of the cat as both an individual and as a product of a breeder’s efforts.

CONCLUSION

Though some embodied experiences between fanciers and cats lead to bonding in the show hall, these are limited. In alignment with Stone’s (2019) findings, benefits in this environment were mostly experienced by humans rather than cats. Cat fanciers develop their skills in both the show hall and the cattery as they learn how to produce “good” cats through enculturation into the hobby; studying genetics; learning about their chosen breed; and developing visual acuity allowing them to evaluate a cat’s quality. Furthermore, for those who choose to enter the judging program, hands-on experience allows them to develop tactile sense for a “good” cat. One’s skill in producing “good” cats is essential to reputation in the fancy, where cats are forever branded in the pedigree record according to their breeder of origin. In assessing and objectifying cats in this way, fanciers risk reducing singular cats to representatives of their breed rather than individuals with their own interests.

However, regarding caregiving interactions, fanciers used many of the same descriptors of the human-cat relationship as do the men in this study, who have no such motivations for

objectification. Caregiving interactions surrounding breeding, raising kittens, and overseeing cats' relocation to a new home result in fanciers viewing themselves as surrogate parents with strong emotional bonds to their cats. Most of my participants described their cats as their children—not only the cats they use in breeding, but the resulting kittens. Some described their role as analogous to a grandparent, who plays a more peripheral, yet still involved, role after kittens leave home. As a result of these relationships, breeders often remain connected to the cats they produce long after they have left the cattery.

Caregiving interactions and enculturation to the cat fancy hobby results in attunement via affinity for specific breeds. Some fanciers likened their relationship to their chosen breed to an intangible, ineffable connection between subjects, while others could point to specific characteristics that endeared them to the breed. In addition, fanciers develop intimate knowledge of their breed's temperaments, needs, and physical traits, leading them to co-construct the breed's identity along with fellow fanciers. Simultaneously, they recognize the individual personalities of cats and honor their preferences by, for example, identifying when a cat is discontent and removing them from showing. Participants also identified attunement via reciprocal relationships with their cats in similar ways to the men in this study. Specifically, they spoke of the emotional support they receive from their cats and a sense of satisfaction when their cats "reward" them with affection for a parenting job well done. In addition, they recognize the value of building a relationship on mutual terms through establishing trust.

Individual and breed relationships experienced through attunement lead to emergence of the breed guardian and advocate identity. Participants spoke of their critical roles in preserving and proliferating breeds, and those who work with breeds that were new or not well-represented maintain a sense of ownership over the breed's success. Fanciers feel impassioned about

ensuring the breed traits they admire persist into the future; some additionally claim they are preserving a part of history by ensuring the continuation of “natural” breeds. Physical traits, temperament, and health are all considerations as fanciers seek to continually improve their breed through selective mating processes. Furthermore, fanciers seek to promote breeds to the public and to other fanciers, allowing them to confirm their identity as a breed advocate through exhibiting knowledge and enthusiasm.

A second identity arose in relation to fanciers’ self-conceptions as good breeders and respectable members of society. This identity emerges through their relationships in a network of other cat people—buyers, fellow exhibitors, and mentors—and in relation to society, which challenges these identities. Participants reported that those who buy their cats, especially those who purchase multiple cats over the years, become close friends or chosen family. These close relationships are exceptionally fulfilling, as not only do they confirm the good breeder identity, they affirm that the breeder is bringing joy to others. Fellow hobbyists, whose shared identities spark relationships, serve a similar function and are viewed as friends and family members who serve as sources of support both inside and outside the show hall. Mentors impart knowledge and socialize new fanciers into the hobby, but their reputations also assist with integration into what participants routinely described as a fairly inhospitable community. Given the trust mentors place in their mentees, the good breeder identity is exalted in these relationships.

In upholding the good breeder identity, relationships in this realm serve to shield fanciers from societal judgment and allow them to reassert this aspect of their selves. Fanciers feel that their aim to preserve breeds is widely misunderstood by activists, veterinarians, and those who advocate for adopting cats, and fear that these groups will be successful in legislation limiting breeding facilities. In addition, they contest widely-held societal notions that breeding cats is

irresponsible and assert that they are not breeding cats for profit, nor do they contribute to overpopulation. Some fanciers did acknowledge that—despite their purposes and practices—they are inextricably linked with commercial and amateur breeders whose only motive is profit, which often results in inhumane conditions for animals. Fanciers also lean on their reputations and the esteem of the organizations they are affiliated with to stake a rhetorical claim of legitimacy.

While serious leisure identities are often a source of perceived deviance—or at least misunderstanding—fanciers may feel especially stigmatized due to the cat’s contested status in society. For example, fanciers often face accusations of hoarding and unsanitary conditions due to stereotypes of the “crazy cat lady.” This leads some fanciers to hide their exhibitor and breeder identities from people they do not know well. In addition, fanciers are perceived as participating in the hobby for selfish reasons, which they contest through eschewing overly competitive exhibitors and those who erase the cat from discourse about winning. These aligning actions aid them in reclaiming their status as a reasonable member of society.

Cat fanciers embody a hybrid relationship with their cats both as individuals and as representatives of their breeds, creating a complex set of expectations for interaction, especially as related to the cat’s own agency in entertainment and reproduction. Objectification and commodification of the cat’s body challenge traditional relational interactions, and breeding raises concerns about the virtue of producing additional cats when so many linger in shelters or are euthanized simply on economic or spatial grounds. Despite these valid criticisms, cat fanciers assert that these activities are undertaken from a place of love and admiration. In my final findings chapter, I describe individuals who are similarly acting from a place of love, and are perhaps the cat fancy’s most vocal critics: cat rescuers.

Chapter 7

“Kittens Under My Deck, Kittens Under My Kittens”: Transforming the Cat Rescuer

Maeve described her former activist self as “almost militant at points; nicely militant, but militant.” She became involved in taking care of community cats when she and her husband moved to a rural area and noticed the population of outdoor cats growing rapidly. She caught the cats in a trap and took them to a clinic to be spayed and neutered, and for a while, she was content to manage the population of cats outside her home. However, as Maeve’s marriage began to deteriorate, she sought counseling. In the face of this massive life change, the counselor suggested that she pursue meaningful activity that would produce benefits outside her immediate sphere: “I’m like, ‘Well, I’d like to do cat rescue.’ And he’s like, ‘Well, why don’t you?’”

For years, Maeve was an activist and volunteer, working on various aspects of trap-neuter-return (TNR, or TNVR for trap-neuter-vaccinate-return) programs. She described the activist part of herself as somebody who would take every opportunity to talk to others about her work:

If I walked into [the grocery store] and there was Girl Scouts out there selling cookies or high school kids raising money, I would stop and I would ask them if they have pets, and I would make a decision on whether I gave them money based on how receptive they were to the spay-neuter message.

Maeve described herself as “not touchy-feely,” but as a pragmatist, one who takes the approach of “stop[ping] the water instead of just keep bailing out the sink.” She wrote letters to elected officials; had custom stickers with an animal welfare message printed for her car; and promoted spay and neuter at community events.

Now, Maeve mostly works “behind the scenes” as an advocate. For her, this means she is listed on the Alley Cat Allies website as a resource who will lend traps and educate people about TNR, and she takes care of the cats in her neighborhood when she sees the need. In addition, she likes to play a supportive role, encouraging the people who contact her by “giv[ing] them a pat on the back for doing it.” People need to be praised for doing the right thing, Maeve contends, because “So many times people are irresponsible...but they can go on with their ignorance and their bliss...somebody else has got to deal with the actual hardship that animal is going through.”

“Somebody else” is Maeve and people like her who care for community cats. Generally, these individuals are volunteers, though some are paid employees of animal welfare organizations. The vast majority are women; approximately half are between the ages of 40 and 59; and most live with companion animals in their home (Centonze and Levy 2002; Neumann 2010; Young and Thompson 2017). As noted in Chapter 2, community cats inspire an array of negative beliefs among the public, ranging from those who live with indoor cats but view outdoor cats as nuisances, to those who wish to eradicate them “by any means necessary” (Marra and Santella 2016:153). Contrary to these attitudes, community cat caretakers feel these animals—the same species who lives in about one of every four American homes—are victims of human irresponsibility who deserve redress in the form of safer, healthier lives. In this chapter, I describe the process of identity transformation among community cat caretakers through interviews with people who contribute to TNR efforts, provide foster homes to adoptable cats, and participate in a variety of other cat-oriented volunteer activities.

Community cat rescuers differ from the other groups I interviewed in that they specifically seek to *avoid* close embodied interactions with the cats they work with. They recognize that their contact with many if not most of the cats they care for will be fleeting. While

there are some exceptions, the vast majority of cats rescuers care for will remain strangers rather than close companions. Embodied experiences with the cats they care for therefore manifest mainly through empathetic understanding and observation rather than hands-on relationships. Similarly, while attunement informs the ways that rescuers interact with community cats, it does not result solely from direct contact with those cats. Rather, it emerges from both close contact with companion cats and embodied empathy experienced on community cats' behalf, as well as observation of their behaviors. As with other groups in this study, I identified two major identity shifts among cat rescuers: self in relation to cats as subjects of moral concern, and self as an agent of change in an indifferent society.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCES WITH CATS

The TNR process involves a series of activities beginning with observing an outdoor site where a cat or cats have claimed territory. After establishing a need to intervene, simply catching the targeted cat(s) will likely require more than one visit to a site. Juliette described the process of watching and waiting: "We'll sit in our car around the corner and we'll listen for the trap to close or we'll watch with our binoculars." After a cat is trapped, a series of events unfolds, as explained by Micah:

You catch the cat...transport it back home...feed it and keep the paper changed in the trap overnight...take it in [to the vet for surgery] the next morning...go pick it up...watch it overnight again in the trap...put food and water in there. They mess it up, maybe...you don't want 'em sitting in their stuff, so you change the paper out...drive 'em back over [to the colony site] the next day...let 'em out of the trap.

Though this process is time-consuming, it does not involve relationship-building between human and cat in the ways described in previous chapters: it is transactional by design. Community cat

caretakers recognize that the cats they work with may or may not be socialized to humans. In either case, their goal is not to create a bond; it is to ultimately better the lives of community cats through managing their numbers and ensuring they have adequate care.

Empathy

Despite this distance, cat rescuers engaged in a form of embodied experience similar to the veterinarians in this study. In chapter 4, I described how feline veterinarians were moved to create better healthcare encounters for cats through imagining themselves in the patient's situation. In a similar way, cat rescuers develop a sense of empathetic concern, which Young and Thompson (2020) define as encompassing perspective-taking, feelings of empathy, and authentic interest in the other's welfare. Brianna summarized concern for community cats' wellbeing from a broad viewpoint: "There are a lot of animals in the world, and our perspective often, especially with cats, is that they're disposable, and for many people they're pests. So I think a lot suffer." Others described particular indignities suffered by community cats, such as discomfort due to extreme weather; fatigue induced by birthing multiple litters in a short period of time; and a lack of safety from cars and indifferent humans. Empathetic concern arises from imagining oneself in a similarly uncomfortable or vulnerable situation: one's own experiences with discomfort thus transfer to the cat. Perhaps reflecting on how she might feel in a similar situation, Maeve gave voice to some of the cats she has helped:

I truly feel like I have experienced a level of gratefulness on the part of an animal that's like, "Thank you that I don't have to have any more kittens. I'm trying to figure out how to feed myself, and here I am trying to raise four or five kittens"...or the male cats that get beat up all the time. I do honestly think that I've experienced true gratitude from a few cats.

Again, some skeptics may believe that Maeve's observation stems from anthropomorphism. However, I contend that Maeve relies on critical rather than sentimental anthropomorphism, as she considers the welfare implications for cats who may have difficulty finding food or safety from aggression. Granted, the appreciation Maeve infers is perhaps a projection of her own feelings. However, in the absence of evidence that such an extrapolation is borne from self-interest—or that it results in negative consequences—I can only conclude that it serves to further her empathy for the cats in her care. Despite identifying and condemning its logical inverse of dehumanization, Waytz, Epley, and Cacioppo (2010:59) assert that, when used judiciously, anthropomorphism's greatest promise is "moral care and consideration."

Indeed, incorporating community cats into their moral sphere compels rescuers to care for cats who exist on the fringes of an already contested species. Caring for community cats appears to be, for rescuers, a moral imperative driven by empathy—a type of embodied experience as explained by Hansson and Jacobsson (2014:266): "Moral sensibilities are embodied: they require perceptive and affective capacities—functions that are bodily grounded while being socially shaped." Additionally, empathy for others in one's in-group predicts helping behavior (Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto 2005; Thoits 2021), raising the possibility that the human-nonhuman boundary is more permeable among rescuers, who are rewarded with neither material goods nor the benefits of companionship. However, their personal sense of commitment to these cats remains steadfast.

ATTUNEMENT

At times, there may be overlap between the cats who live with rescuers and those who are the focus of their advocacy, as when a rescuer chooses to adopt a friendly outdoor cat they cared for, or when they feed an established colony on their property. Speaking of the latter situation,

Sylvie noted that while she worries about and feels fondness toward the cats she feeds and shelters in her garage, she tries to remain guarded: “If you’re so crazy attached, it’s just so, so difficult when they stop showing up for dinner.” Similarly—and as documented by Crawford and colleagues (2023) and Neal and Wolf (2023)—Micah affirmed that he thinks of the cats on his property as his own: “I consider them my cats, even though they’re community cats. If someone took one, I’d be pissed. I’d be devastated.” Still, cats who are released back into the community outside one’s private property remain subjects of concern among rescuers. Sylvie admitted, “When I release them, I feel like I have to keep going back there...a certain number of times, just to make sure.” Beyond investing time and emotional energy, several caretakers discussed fellow rescuers who have few material resources, but devote what little they do have to caring for community cats. Autumn described individuals she works with who are of modest means, but nevertheless feel accountable to the cats they care for:

I work with a lot of people that are on very fixed incomes and they're spending money to feed these cats that they really get very little from. They don't get attention, they don't get love, but they realize how important it is to these cats.

While rescuers may not receive affection from the cats they care for, their empathy and sense of moral justice compel them to act. They do not demand the same type of reciprocal relationship they may receive from their steady companions. However, they still achieve a sense of attunement with these cats, even though it is a one-way attunement.

Feline Telos

Rescuers experience attunement with the species—and, in particular, certain subpopulations of the species (e.g., cats with no possibility of becoming socialized to humans)—through rescue activities, becoming familiar with their *telos*: “the essence...of any type of

animal—the pigness of the pig, the cowness of the cow, the dogness of the dog” (Rollin 2007:132). For instance, as Sylvie remarked above, she monitors the cats who she releases back into the community; however, she describes eventually knowing when the cats are safe: “Once I know they're good, they're doing life as a feral just fine...then I'm okay.” Over time, Sylvie’s involvement with community cats has allowed her to draw on two sources of attunement established through interaction to recognize when cats are “doing life as a feral” well. First, the empathetic experiences described earlier allow her to inhabit an embodied sense of safety as a biological being whose needs for food, shelter, and good health are secure. Second, over time, her observation of community cats has given her the ability to interpret their behaviors, language, and other nuances of communication.

Moreover, though there are undoubtedly some behavioral differences between cats who live indoors and those who are not acclimated to humans, innate behaviors among all members of the species remain constant. Rescuers who have lived with a cat in their home are therefore attuned to and appreciate feline behaviors as a result of these relationships. I was unsurprised to find that rescuers described their attunement with companion cats in the same ways as other groups in this study. For example, several people identified themselves as similar to cats in terms of personality and preferences. Claudia felt that cats don’t seek out others’ approval: “Cats are...like me. I don’t need any validation.” Layla described her desire to engage in social interaction on her terms: “I like to be with people when I want to. I'm very picky. Do not come over to my house unannounced and be like, ‘Hey, let's hang out.’”

Reciprocity

Interviewees also talked about the mutual nature of relationships with their companion cats. Maeve spoke of emotional support given by her cats: “I know there's times when I've been

upset and the cats have responded to that in a way that...shows that they may not understand, but they do in their own way.” Erin echoed appreciative sentiments about earning cats’ trust expressed consistently across my four groups of interviewees:

I think the relationship you can have with a cat can be really special where you're earning that trust and it's not just given to you. And I think there's something very special in that you can build a bond with this creature...it feels like it almost shouldn't exist, because you guys are so different and they should just be out murdering animals like they like to do, but instead they're curled up in your lap and they love you and they're happy with you and you feed them and it just works. It's just beautiful.

Additionally, Annie rendered a striking picture of the ineffable effects her cats create in her home, reminiscent especially of the ways that the men in this study designated their cats as co-creators of the space: “I like to get home and just have that comfort...I feel myself when I'm with my cats. They are peaceful; they provide me a sense of peace and harmony and balance.”

Individuality and Agency

An additional aspect of attunement surfaced in rescuers’ descriptions of cats as individuals. The community cat caretaker represents a unique locus of the human-cat relationship in that many of them live with cats as companions, but work with other cats in a limited intersubjective capacity. This work-home separation is similar to veterinarians, but differs in that veterinarians foster bonds with their patients and their interactions are, ideally, ongoing. The rescuer’s emphasis on the broad goals of animal welfare may seem to limit their view to animals as a monolith—or cats as a species. Indeed, though many interviewees professed to a special affinity for cats, they see themselves as having a more holistic worldview, of which cats are but

one piece. Annie exemplified this position: “I have a very strong feeling [of] identity with animals in general...above all, I'm an animal lover, but I have to confess that I have a special relationship with cats.” Others, such as Autumn, maintained that they did not arrive at working in cat welfare out of a particular love for the species, but out of necessity: “I've always been a sucker for the underdog, and feral cats truly are the underdog of animal welfare...they were too wild for the animal welfare organizations and they were too domestic for wildlife, so nobody did anything for them.”

Nevertheless, despite their broad scope of concern—and their lack of meaningful interaction with the cats they care for—community cat rescuers spoke of cats as individuals with personalities and preferences. Isla opined that those who do not recognize cats' individuality have simply not pursued a meaningful relationship: “People say cats have no personality. They all have such unique and interesting personalities if you take the time to get to that level of interaction where they trust you to let you see who they are.” Some caretakers expressed disdain for people who expect cats to behave in uniform, predictable ways across the species, an especially germane observation given the stratum that community cats occupy. Claudia, who has worked in animal welfare for several decades, decried potential adopters who impose expectations on their cats: “Every once in a while, I get people like, ‘I want a lap cat. I want a mouser...I want the cat to be lovey dovey.’ And it's like, you know what? It's not about you. It's about the cat.” Recognizing the individuality of community cats specifically, Maeve—in describing the importance of her work—noted, “Saving one cat won't change the world, but it'll change the world for that cat.” These comments demonstrate that though betterment of life for animals is a broad shared goal, my participants do not erase singular animals' individuality in its pursuit.

Arguably, however, the animal rescuer both honors and obstructs agency in the domestic cat. Meijer (2021:290) posits that “Catching cats, taking care of them afterwards, socialising the ones who show they want be socialised, releasing the others; all of this is done in ways that the cats co-determine, even though the power relations are not equal.” In this way, community cats possess agency that rescuers may not even consciously recognize, indicating a highly refined sense of attunement on the caretaker’s—if not necessarily the cat’s—part. Careful observation, knowledge of feline behavior, and empathy drive the rescuer to structure the caretaking process to be as least disruptive to cats’ routines and preferences as possible. Conversely, Meijer argues, “The cat’s right to life, bodily integrity, and autonomy are not always recognized, which seemingly contradicts their commitment to cat agency and subjectivity. This is most visible in their approach to...neutering” (2021:293). Meijer further characterizes sterilization of community cats as presumptuous and paternalistic.

Some advocates argue that paternalism is, in some cases, justified and even required of humans as caretakers of domesticated or semi-domesticated animals. Extrapolating from a co-citizenship model that grants nonhumans rights based on possession of selfhood, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011:147) conclude that, as unsterilized outdoor cats do not self-regulate their reproduction, intervention could be considered “a reasonable element in a larger scheme of cooperation.” The authors reason that while reproduction is an inviolable right, such rights are accompanied by responsibility to prevent undue hardship on others. Species such as cats, who reproduce at a young age and produce multiple litters over their lifetime, pose a burden to others who must care for their offspring; therefore, imposing some limits on their ability to do so may be warranted¹. Palmer (2013) rightly points out that most organizations involved in processes

¹The authors’ stance on curtailing reproduction does not necessarily extend to sterilizing cats who live indoors.

such as TNR operate not from a rights framework, but from a welfare agenda. However, on this issue, the two stances converge on the supposition that agency is “highly variable, and dependent on individual, contextual, and structural factors” (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011:122). In this case, concern for individual agency—or at least the reproductive aspect of it—is outweighed by the potential harms of allowing community cats to procreate unchecked. Moreover, my interviewees expressed the view that human irresponsibility is to blame for feline overpopulation; as Autumn noted, “These cats are out there because we failed them.” Thus, since we create and sustain the problem, it is incumbent upon us to address the consequences. This viewpoint is fundamental to community cat caretakers’ identities as both moral agents and effectors of positive change.

PERSONAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: SELF IN RELATION TO CATS AS SUBJECTS OF MORAL CONCERN

Moral Identity and Volunteerism

To understand how identity influences community cat caretakers to devote themselves to this cause, it is instructive to consider the difference between volunteerism motivated by function and volunteerism motivated by identity. As the name implies, functional motivations for volunteerism generally satisfy a conscious goal, such as gaining skills or knowledge; making friends; or engaging in self-betterment (Clary et al. 1998). For example, Abell (2013) posited that conservation volunteers distance themselves from the rest of humankind as a means of alleviating guilt related to harming the environment, a manifestation of the protective function proposed by Clary and Snyder (1999). However, using a modified version of Clary and colleagues’ (1998) Volunteer Functions Inventory, Neumann (2010:355) explored the motivations of animal welfare volunteers and found that they much less frequently cited self-protective reasons. Instead, they were highly driven by the values function, which encompassed

statements such as “I am concerned about animals in unfortunate positions”; “I am genuinely concerned about the animals I am serving”; “I feel compassion toward animals in need”; and “I feel it is important to help animals.” Annie demonstrated alignment with these stances when she tearfully avowed, “[If you] ask me, what [would] you change in the world...for me, it's to end animal cruelty...I know there are a lot of things—awful things—happening in the world, but for me, this is my number one cause.”

While functional outcomes predict engaging in volunteerism, the *specific* causes with which individuals connect are directly related to identity (Thoits 2021; Thomas, Rathmann, and McGarty 2017). However, the link between the two is far from tenuous. Considering that the individuals in Neumann’s (2010) research identified as values-driven, it is prudent to engage with the idea that for those with strong moral convictions “...principles have been both internalized and appropriated as part of one’s identity. They are no longer regarded as external rules that constrain behavior but as moral convictions that are ‘owned’ by the self” (Schlenker, Miller, and Johnson 2009:319). That is, for certain individuals, ethical beliefs are not a guidepost for determining right or wrong; good or bad; reward or punishment. Rather, they elicit action because they become intertwined with one’s very understanding of who they are. Based on my discussions with participants, I concur with Young and Thompson (2020:167) that community cat caretakers seem to be “motivated by a moral mission to protect.” This moral mission is animated by the rescuer’s moral identity, or “the extent to which being moral is a central or essential characteristic of the sense of self” (Hardy and Carlo 2005:235).

The concept of identity operating as a motivator for moral action—most extensively defined in the Self Model constructed by Blasi (1983)—is especially relevant to community cat caretakers and involves three major tenets. First, it involves a “responsibility judgment” through

which the individual, prior to taking morally determined action, clarifies their level of obligation to the situation. This is an inherently personal criterion, as Blasi (1983:198) notes: “A judgment about what is good or right...remains abstract and intellectual if the individual does not relate it to himself and does not see himself as necessarily involved with both situation and action.” A claim of personal accountability was evident in cat rescuers’ narratives about human culpability for community cats’ suffering. Additionally, some rescuers may feel a stronger communal orientation that manifests in conscientiousness toward others—human and nonhuman—as demonstrated by Isla: “We all have a responsibility to everything that we interact with in our lives, in this world, cats included.”

A second principle of Blasi’s Self Model, following directly from the first, is that responsibility judgments are filtered through one’s moral identity. An underlying assumption of this principle is that individuals’ self-definitions diverge in “the way these characteristics [traits, attitudes, and percepts] are ordered and organized and...that narrow area of functioning that is apprehended as ‘deep,’ ‘central,’ and ‘essential’” (Blasi 1983:200). Thus, as moral identities differ in strength and orientation, so too will responsibility judgments and, ultimately, actions. For the community cat caretaker, moral identity aligns closely with the ideas of Hart, Atkins, and Ford (1998:515), who conceive of it as “a commitment consistent with one’s sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others.” Rescuers consistently talked about their underlying ambition to improve the lives of community cats, ensure their safety, and protect their health. Furthermore, several caretakers connected their goals to the wellbeing of their communities. Brianna noted, “I don’t see it just as a cat thing. I’m working...to help make my community a better place to live, as well as helping the animals and trying to find a humane solution that can help everyone.” Micah similarly described himself as a person who feels deeply

moved to help those in need: “When you see people that need help, it's hard to just ignore them or say no. You try to do what you can.” While Micah mentioned “people that need help,” our conversation at this point was about helping people in the context of helping cats. For many community cat caretakers, helping cats *becomes* helping people, even though aiding humans may not have served as their initial impetus for work in this sphere.

The third foundation of the Self Model of moral action relies on the supposition that the desire to maintain a consistent self will inspire action in alignment with one’s identity, as predicted by identity theory and self-verification theory (Burke 1980; Swann 1983). Blasi (1983:201) asserted that to act otherwise would constitute “a fracture within the very core of the self,” a potential precursor to distress (Burke 1991). For Erin, the desire to act in accordance with her self-concept arose from the love she feels for cats: “I went from just a cat person—someone who loves cats and had a cat and was obsessed with their cat—to somebody who walks the walk a little more.” This statement speaks directly to Erin’s aspiration to align her identification with cats and her actions on their behalf. Some rescuers reported feeling a calling, characterizing caretaking not as a choice, but an internal sense of being. Layla explained: “I heard somebody recently say that you don't choose causes, causes choose you. And I guess I was born to be the cat caregiver.”

The question remains as to where this calling morphs into action. Clearly, not all people with a strong moral identity choose to focus their efforts on animal welfare, nor do all those with an “animal person” identity advocate on behalf of nonhumans. Several possibilities exist for why these particular individuals’ moral identities express through supporting cats in particular—and, moreover, cats who have been cast out of many people’s realm of concern. Some participants discussed their affinity with cats from a young age, remarking that they have lived with cats

since childhood and could not imagine life without a feline companion. Similarly, several interviewees described relationships with particular cats, ascribing them the status of soulmate or recounting the cat's lasting impacts on their sense of self as a cat person. These embodied experiences with cats seem to have imprinted on these individuals, directing their sense of empathy toward creatures with whom they have formed indelible bonds. Most—though not all—described themselves as either a cat person or an animal person. Many participants also discussed the marginalized status of cats, and community cats in particular, perhaps revealing an orientation toward empathy for those who possess little societal esteem, are not responsible for their plight, and have little power to change the situation (Angantyr, Eklund, and Hansen 2011; Quesque et al. 2021). Eleven of my 12 respondents were women, a group that some theorize have faced many of these same obstacles:

Feminists—indeed most women—are acutely aware of what it feels like to have one's opinion ignored, trivialized, rendered unimportant. Perhaps this experience has awakened their sensitivity to the fact that other marginalized groups—including animals—have trouble getting their viewpoints heard (Donovan 2006:306).

The junction at which moral identity translates to endeavors to support animal welfare certainly warrants more study. Among my participants, action seems to logically follow strong alignment with moral identity and an animal or cat person identity, thus fulfilling Blasi's (1983) prediction that actions taken preserve consistency of self.

There is some disagreement among scholars, however, as to whether moral identity predicts moral action in all cases. For instance, while Hertz and Krettenauer (2016) found some evidence of causality in a meta-analysis of 111 studies, the effect size of moral identity on moral

action was not much stronger than other internal variables. The authors thus speculate that moral identity should be positioned “in a broader conceptual framework where it interacts with other personological and situational factors to bring about moral action” (2016:136). For the cat rescuer, this may be love for cats, though not all of my interviewees identified as cat people or claimed a particular affinity for the species. External validation also does not appear to be a factor in caretakers’ motivations, as their work is largely unrecognized; costs time and money; and can be emotionally taxing. Furthermore, rescuers are stigmatized through not only their association with cats, but with community cats in particular.

Stigmatized Caregivers

As a result of disregard for their work, Young and Thompson (2020:162) contend that community cat caretakers experience a particular form of compassion fatigue, which they label “stigmatized-care fatigue.” The first characteristic of stigmatized-care fatigue delineating it from regular compassion fatigue is that those who experience it lack institutional backing—such as that of a workplace or strong volunteer infrastructure—for mental health support. Many community cat caretakers are associated with loosely-structured non-profit organizations or no organization at all, leaving them to tend to their own emotional wellbeing. The second trait of stigmatized-care fatigue is that the work itself is denounced.

When I asked Sylvie how she thinks others perceive her, she replied candidly, “I don’t even need to guess, ‘cause people tell me all the time. They’re like, ‘Oh, so you’re the crazy cat lady.’” It is important to acknowledge that caretaking work for cats is degraded as both feminine and irrational, as Greenebaum (2009:301) points out that “The majority of rescue workers are female and, like other forms of caring work, rescue work is invisible, taken for granted, and devalued.” Indeed, Juliette referred to her fellow caretakers as “the old girls network,” while

Claudia spoke of her organization's efforts to allay the stereotype that only older women care about cats. While the crazy cat lady label endures as shorthand for a single, mentally unstable woman with few human ties—and many feline ones—people of all genders now adopt the label as a way of resisting its power to belittle. Sylvie, for instance, replied to her imaginary conversation partner above, “Well, yes, I am.” For people who claim the moniker willingly, “crazy cat lady” can simply mean they have affection for the species and like observing, learning about, and interacting with cats. For the rescuer, it additionally signifies their investment in ensuring the health and safety of community cats.

Simultaneously, cat rescuers go to great lengths to resist characterization as “truly” crazy cat ladies (Young and Thompson 2020), defining them as Claudia did: “The hoarder, the woman with many cats.” Samdahl (2015:103) points out the damaging effects of misconstruing the cat rescuer's work as hoarding: “Calling these people hoarders twists their identity into a stigmatized caricature that strikes a cruel blow to self-esteem.” According to my interviewees, however, even some members of the rescue community can fall under this description. Relating a story about offering to help another rescuer at a colony of cats in a large store's parking lot, Sylvie illustrated the kind of crazy cat lady she is *not*:

I hung out one evening to wait to see who came and this person pulled up; I just wanted to give them my information in case they ever needed a day off. They screamed and yelled; they cussed at me...[Their car] is piled from the seats to the ceiling with cat stuff...I was side by side in a different car and I could smell the stink of their car...old cat food cans and stuff.

By comparing themselves to the type of person who is harming the rescuer reputation, cat caretakers distance themselves from the identity they do not wish to exemplify.

Other accusations leveled at community cat caretakers dispute their identities as morally-oriented caretakers as well. One such claim is that community cats are not worthy of attention or resources, especially when they are unsocialized and will remain so. Several of my interviewees mentioned that their work is appreciated by those who are already oriented toward care for animals—for example, if they live with a companion animal or portray themselves as concerned about animal welfare. However, for those with a neutral or less favorable opinion toward animals, unsocialized cats likely register as little more than a nuisance to eliminate. Thompson (2012:89) explained, “Feral caretaking is discredited because it challenges the modern definition of pet ownership and the traditional views of moral obligation regarding the care of undomesticated non-human animals.” Embracing this mindset allows those who do not understand rescuers’ work to discredit them in a similar way to the hunters in Einwohner’s (2002) study, who dismissed anti-hunting activists as driven by unreasonable sentimentality. Viewing anti-hunting activists in this way allows their opponents to protect the hunter identity; for those who oppose cat rescuers’ activities, it allows them to resist responsibility for cats’ suffering.

Furthermore, rescuers’ duty-to-care identity is challenged by those who speak out against community cats in particular, such as some conservation scientists who may believe that “cats are killers, even serial killers, and that the time has come or is long past to declare all out ‘war’ on such cats and to kill as many of them as possible” (Wandesforde-Smith et al. 2021:4). Some may cast the community cat caretaker in an even more unfavorable light, creating a false dichotomy between caring for cats and caring for humans. Frustrated, Layla talked about people who don’t comprehend why she spends time and money caring for cats:

When they find out you feed cats or you do TNVR, they're like, "Why aren't you out spending time with people or building a house for the homeless?" But I say, "Well, that's just my thing. Other people do other things." But some people just...don't understand it.

This line of thought erroneously assumes that directing care to nonhumans demands diverting it from pressing human needs, just as Perrow (2002:473) hyperbolically proclaimed that studying human-animal relationships would cause "drift from human poverty and social injustice" among sociologists. On the contrary, Brianna, who studied social work in graduate school, maintained that "The majority of people that care about cats are people that care about people."

Similarly, and in a reflection of misunderstanding hobbyists, friends and family members may feel that the rescuer is overly dedicated to the animals they care for. They may even express umbrage at the amount of time the rescuer spends on caretaking (Young and Thompson 2020). Indeed, animal welfare volunteers are devoted; Neumann (2010) found that most reported volunteering at least once per week. Stella confirmed that trapping cats can be especially time-consuming:

When you're trying to trap feral cats, especially one with kittens, it's not usually a one-shot thing. I remember one time it took us all two weeks to catch a mom and her five kittens at a landscaping company. Every night I would go up there.

While many of my participants also donate money to animal welfare causes, their time may be a more valuable indicator of moral identity in action. Reed and colleagues (2016:437) explain that "Compared with giving money, giving time more strongly reinforces the moral self...because it requires a greater expenditure of effort and is a resource that, once given, cannot be taken back." The authors further contend that the consistency and significance of one's moral identity can

positively influence the decision to dedicate time to a cause. Among rescuers, time spent on caretaking activities allows confirmation of the second identity shift they experience: one who takes action in a culture that has neglected community cats.

SOCIAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION: AGENT OF CHANGE IN AN INDIFFERENT SOCIETY

In research about animal rights activists, Einwohner (2002:256) wrote, “One way that outsiders contribute to the construction of activists’ identity is by providing a boundary for activists’ self-definition, or a ‘they’ who represent the limits of what it means to be the ‘I’.”² In the identity work of community cat caretakers, their foils are members of a largely unsympathetic society that has continually failed animals and, in particular, community cats. Fueled by their moral orientations, cat rescuers position themselves against a seemingly immovable wall of inaction and apathy, forging an identity for themselves as agents of change for nonhuman wellbeing. I posit that deeply-held principles catalyze enthusiastic action on behalf of the nonhumans rescuers care for, manifesting in two core, interlinked roles: the problem solver and the educator.

Problem Solver

A desire to take action results from the moral identities and responsibility judgments of community cat caretakers, encompassing such tenets as compassion, empathy, and duty to care for nonhumans (Crawford et al. 2023). The cats that caretakers support are beneficiaries of their notion of “responsibility to support and contribute to the common good...[and] a worldview that is notably...more prosocial than individualistic” (Reed and Selbee 2002:24). In this way,

²I will discuss my participants’ concepts of themselves as activists later in this chapter. However, I use research concerning identity construction among animal activists as a useful comparison, given the groups’ similarities in motives for action.

rescuers recognize outdoor cats as members of their social world: cats' wellbeing contributes to the community's wellbeing.

In a striking parallel to the veterinarians in the present study, many of the rescuers I spoke to reported that they noticed a disparity in care for cats. Several who had worked in other areas of animal welfare characterized cats as overlooked in the animal welfare world, just as in the veterinary sphere. Claudia told a story about a \$9 million development campaign at the local humane society where she volunteered: "I really didn't feel like they were expanding anything for the cats...there was a huge gap." Others were concerned when they noticed an increase in the cat population near their homes. Isla described the desire to act when she relocated to an area with many community cats: "Shortly after we got there I was like, wow, there's a lot of cats <laugh>. I'm like, okay, well what do we do about this...something has to be done. There's all these cats, nobody's feeding them, they're starving." Isla's declaration that "something has to be done" arose frequently among my interviewees, along with similar statements such as "somebody has to do something" and feeling compelled to "do something."

Among my participants, confronting the problem themselves was the obvious solution. For Isla, this meant recognizing that "Somebody has to step up and take responsibility even when it's not their problem. If we all just ignore it, nothing gets done." Several interviewees recounted personal narratives of seeking out assistance—not simply contacting an organization and asking them to remove the cats, but requesting training in the skills required to address the problem on an ongoing basis. Sylvie recalled,

I reached out to a person who I knew from years previous when I was vaguely kind of interested or involved...I'm like, "Okay, teach me, Obi Wan. What do I do about all these cats?" And she loaned me a couple of traps.

Even new rescuers with no training feel compelled to assist. Autumn described a phone call she received as an employee of an animal welfare organization. A man had discovered a cat in an alley near his home, but didn't know how to proceed: "It was kind of weighing on me. So two days later I called the gentleman back and I said, '...It's not something I've ever done, but I could try to come out there and try to trap this cat.'"

Interviewees' initiative stood in contrast to others in their communities who don't take action, but are thankful for the rescuers' efforts. Isla talked about neighbors who didn't understand her motivations for caring for community cats, but eventually came to appreciate her efforts: "Suddenly there's not kittens everywhere. There's not new cats coming in. There's not fighting. Everybody gets along, everybody's reasonably happy and fed, and they're just like, 'Wow, okay, so maybe that actually worked.'" Sylvie discussed the gratitude that "even the cat haters" feel, given that an established colony of community cats keeps the population of rats who feed on fruit trees under control. In this case, the cats who live in the neighborhood have become the "lesser evil" pest due to their control of the rats, who are even lower on the hierarchy of what Nagy and Johnson (2013) term "trash animals."

External validation similar to these examples can act as an adjunct to the intrinsic satisfaction of identity confirmation promoted by acting on behalf of community cats—though, as noted earlier, it is not necessary to motivate rescuers. Furthermore, both types of validation may serve to bolster rescuers' sense of commitment to the cause. Caretakers view themselves as dedicated to not only individual cats in their charge, but to solving the root problem of overpopulation. Juliette criticized the mindsets of government officials who wish to take an "out of sight, out of mind" approach: "A lot of times the gentlemen at the city government will say, 'Don't feed the cats, they'll go away.' Well, then they just become someone else's problem."

Annie talked about people who contact her and expect her to remove cats from their property with no further intervention:

Many times people just want me to go there and just take the cats away. They just want to get rid of the problem. I tell them, “That's not what I'm here for, I'm here to provide resources and help people to find solutions.”

Attitudes such as those described by Juliette and Annie are the antithesis of caretakers' endeavors and convictions. Not only do they evade responsibility, defying the rescuer's identity as somebody who acts; they evidence no empathy for the cats as worthy of care, defying the rescuer's identity as a compassionate community member.

For about half of my participants, their identification with compassionate action led them to define themselves as advocates and eschew the activist label. Guenther (2017:250) posited that involvement in politics muddies the waters of actually caring for animals among people who conceive of themselves as advocates: “Their volunteerism is about helping animals, not about getting involved in politics.” Greenebaum (2009:295) similarly discussed rescuers' work in terms of on-the-ground work that is “neither political nor fighting for structural change.” Erin, an interviewee who seemed undecided about whether to call herself an activist or an advocate, described it as “I'm not out there pushing legislation or getting people to vote, so I don't really consider myself...it's almost like a quiet activism.” Others embraced the activist label, given that they engage in activities to promote systemic change. Sylvie, for example, attends governmental meetings where she can “connect it to the top of the pyramid of who's making bad decisions on behalf of these animals.” Micah, who also identifies himself as an activist, reported positive reception from local officials: “I've been really working on trying to change ordinances...I got

some pretty receptive feedback on it...Some of the council members from each place responded, said they're really open to that.”

Working with Other Rescuers. Community cat caretakers also engage with other rescuers to achieve their goals, seeing it as an opportunity for like-minded individuals to work together to solve a problem. According to Thomas and colleagues (2017), personal motivations and identities may inspire involvement in volunteerism; however, a shared social identity with others sustains the work over time. Thus, as White and Fraser (2000:326) conclude, “The collective identity of a social movement develops from shared aspects of the personal identities of movement activists.” A shared identity—and thus shared values, given the intertwining of values with identity among rescuers—results in solidarity among caretakers (Hunt and Benford 2004). Autumn reported that their common purpose forges a sense of unity among rescuers, even when they disagree: “We have different opinions, we have different ways of doing stuff and different philosophies to some extent, but we've always found a way to work together.” Helping each other with individual cases also provides an opportunity for rescuers to cultivate collective identity. Isla told a story about finding a young mother cat who needed to be spayed as soon as possible:

I had a mom, the babies were weaning. I had called [rescuer] and she's like, “I don't know what to tell you; everybody's backed up.” She called me a few days later and she said, “I had a situation, I had to cancel an appointment, call them right now and you can get my spot.” So people do try to help each other as much as they can.

Individual identities are also confirmed through this process. Sylvie spoke of her fellow rescuers’ certitude that she is committed to helping in any way she can: “Everyone knows if I get a text

that says, ‘Can you join me at 10 o'clock tonight? We gotta trap these at this warehouse’ or something, the answer is always yes. Unless I'm bleeding out the eyes, then yes.” Sylvie’s reputation as somebody who will always take action cements her social identity as member of the collective movement of caretakers, but also recognizes her personal identity as a problem solver who will act when needed. In discourse and in action, this “supportive identity work” (Young and Thompson, 2017:888) operates in accordance with role identity to confirm the volunteer identity (Burke and Stets 2023a; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980; Thoits 2021).

Building a collective identity also includes making “emotional investments, which enable individuals to recognize themselves” (Melucci 1988:343). These investments may be difficult to reconcile for rescuers, whose actions are motivated by aspects of the self that induce emotional expression, but who must perform emotion work in the course of caring for community cats (Hochschild 1979; Jasper 1998). Autumn described her compassion for animals with the greatest need for care: “It just really pulled on my heartstrings that there were these cats out there...I always said they were stuck between the animal welfare field.” Stella similarly expressed sadness at the situations of animals who suffer neglect: “It breaks my heart to see animals that aren’t taken care of.” In addition, rescuers may feel a sense of moral outrage, or “a prosocial emotion reflecting a desire to restore justice by fighting on behalf of the victimized” (Rothschild and Keefer 2017:209; Thomas, McGarty, and Mavor 2009). Maeve, visibly angry, described others’ lack of accountability for their animals: “That's one of the things that really makes me mad...they abandon their animals, or they abuse their animals, but they can go on and think somebody will take care of it.” Despite these and other feelings that interviewees articulated as their reasons for performing this work, rescuers must, to some extent, suppress their expression

as a means of emotional shielding in ways similar to the veterinarians in this study. For instance, Juliette explained that she remains detached from the cats she cares for to avoid sorrow when they are released: “Because I’m not gonna have a relationship with this cat longer than two or three days I just kind of keep my distance emotionally...If you let it get to you, then you can’t volunteer in that same way.”

Another reason to engage in emotion management arises from opponents of this work, who may weaponize emotional expression against animal rescuers. An example from the world of animal rights activists is instructive: “Animal rights supporters describe their journey into animal rights activism in terms of their emotional attachments to animals. But they do not consider themselves to be *emotional*” (Groves 2001:215, emphasis original). Thus, to ward off accusations of their positions being motivated by irrationality or anthropomorphism, these groups mask emotion as central to their aims. Integrating these realities with the very tenets of identity that prompt these individuals to act on behalf of animals presents a challenge to rescuers’ senses of self. In some ways, however, an empathy-driven identity can work to rescuers’ benefit in another of their roles, the educator.

Educator

Most of my participants view educating others about community cats and TNR as a critical aspect of their work. Not only do they aim to educate about how TNR works and why it is valuable; they wish to address falsehoods that plague the reputation of community cats. As Sylvie remarked, “I really would like to change the perception that they’ll live short lives, they’re disease-ridden...all of the misconceptions.” Several interviewees mentioned that they wish to impress upon people that community cats are the same animals who are cherished companions in many homes. Claudia observed, “I have learned that the only difference between these cats and

my cats is my cats have a roof over their head and they're always gonna be fed.” Autumn, however, noted that convincing people of unsocialized cats’ worth is not always easy: “These are lives that are generally overlooked, and they're not cats that you can pick up and cuddle and sleep with and watch TV.”

In attempting to change others’ perceptions of community cats, some rescuers may draw on their own values-informed identities to connect with those with similar principles. Claudia told a story about a conversation with a man at a community event who had initially resisted her attempt at outreach due to his preference for dogs:

I said, “Oh, I don't think it matters whether you're a dog or a cat or a hamster or lizard person. But are you a kind, compassionate person where seeing animals suffer goes to your heart?” And he said, “Well, of course.” And I said, “Well, let me tell you about our group.”

Similarly, when in contact with people who directly appeal to them for help, rescuers take the opportunity to educate them on the TNR process and why it’s beneficial. Due to their initiative in seeking assistance rather than taking matters into their own hands in either an ineffectual or cruel way, rescuers view these people as potential allies. Maeve hopes that she can model positive behavior to those who are open to taking action: “Maybe I can set an example for a person here or there that sees that somebody needs to take responsibility for their neighborhood and the cats in their neighborhood.”

However, when rescuers encounter people who seem indifferent to community cats, connecting with them may be challenging due to an inherently incompatible moral orientation: a challenge to the rescuer’s own identity. Isla approached a neighbor to ask him if she could place a trap on the fence line between their properties, as a cat she wished to capture often roamed on

the neighbor's land. Upon finding out the neighbor was a veterinarian, Isla asked if he would be interested in assisting with the TNR effort. When he declined, she was appalled:

I thought, how sad as a veterinarian to know the suffering, the difficult life that these cats have because they're just allowed to reproduce unchecked...you would just think of all people that would understand the need or want to help...it was really kind of shocking for me.

Isla's vision of a shared identity between herself and her neighbor arose from her assumption of both being concerned about the plight of all animals. When her neighbor showed no interest in assisting with TNR, it served as an affront to her own sense of moral identity: this person, armed with similar knowledge of the difficulties faced by community cats, chooses to turn away from the situation while Isla simply cannot ignore it.

In these cases, rescuers may employ a similar tactic as the animal activists studied by Einwohner (2002), who project analytical selves publicly, yet engage in "identity avowal" in private to reconfirm their true senses of self (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994:193). One of the key ways that rescuers project logical selves is by explaining their activities in terms of benefits to the community. Micah explained, "I think it's really important when you're doing community cat work to tell your neighbors what you're doing, why [they're] noticing tipped cats³. It helps stabilize the neighborhood." Layla talked about appealing to outsiders through appreciating their annoyances with community cats:

If you have a bunch of intact cats running around, they're spraying on the yard, they're howling, they're fighting, they're trying to attack indoor cats...They may

³"Tipped cats" refers to the practice of removing the tip of one ear on trapped and sterilized cats to provide a visual signal to rescuers that the cat has already been altered.

or may not care how many animals are killed in a shelter, but they care about the animals that are pooping on their lawn or...scaring the birds.

Through projecting their own selves as similar to outsiders to community cat caretaking, rescuers can potentially convince others to recognize the importance of their cause. Expression of true identity, in this case, is secondary to achieving the desired outcome of reducing suffering in the cat population.

CONCLUSION

Community cat caretakers' embodied experiences with the cats they work with are more distant than others who work with cats—for example, veterinarians—as they are not seeking to build relationships. Rather, they are committed to bettering cats' lives through targeted interventions that are designed to be short-term, whether that entails the TNR process or fostering cats on their way to a permanent home. For some cat caretakers, embodied experiences involve observation, such as watching cat colonies to best plan a strategy for TNR and associated follow-up activities. The major source of embodied experiences for cat rescuers, however, is developing empathetic concern, forged through imagining oneself in the cat's situation. For example, some rescuers cited outdoor cats' physical discomfort and difficulty finding safe shelter as motivations for providing assistance. Empathetic concern also encompasses attention to another's welfare, which translates in the cat rescuer to a moral imperative for their care.

Involvement in cats' care fosters attunement in cat rescuers, though it is somewhat different from others in this study in that it is mostly unidirectional from person to cat. The cats that many rescuers work with generally remain unacquainted with the humans caring for them, a vast difference in the level of attunement between, for example, humans and companion cats. Rescuers, however, remain attuned to the cats they work with through observation of behaviors

and body language common to the species, honed through not only their work, but their own close interactions with the cats in their homes. They consider the cats they work with “theirs,” and feel accountable for their well-being even after the cats are re-released into the community. Attunement with companion cats emerged in many of the same ways as others in this study, in that cat rescuers described themselves as similar to cats; gave examples of mutual affective exchange; and designated their cats as co-creators of their physical space. Additionally, rescuers spoke of cats as individuals, both those they live with and those they care for outside their home. This view remained fairly consistent among my interviewees, despite the fact that rescuers take a broader view of animal welfare and conceive of their work as for the betterment of the species. They view their work as essential to ensuring the wellbeing of community cats, who they contend are in their precarious situation due to human failures. This leads to their first major identity transformation, self in relation to cats as subjects of moral concern.

While a few of my interviewees are paid employees of animal welfare organizations, the majority are volunteers. Several work in conjunction with an organization, while others are not affiliated with any group. Motivations to engage in volunteer work fall under two major categories: functional and identity-related. Functional motivations for volunteering are generally goal-oriented; for example, the volunteer may wish to gain specific skills or build a professional network. Other outcomes are closely tied to individuals’ personal values and entail concern, compassion, and personal responsibility. These are in turn closely intertwined with identity-related motivations for volunteerism, which predict the specific causes that people pursue when volunteering. For some individuals, their moral principles become internalized as part of their identity, which is, in turn, externalized in the form of work on behalf of others.

In the case of cat rescuers, their moral identity—or the degree to which they consider their moral convictions as an essential part of self—emerges through their work on behalf of community cats. This is evident through the lens of Blasi's (1983) Self Model, which specifies that identity functions as a motivation for moral action in three ways: the individual makes a responsibility judgment about their level of obligation to act; the individual's specific moral identity directly informs the responsibility judgment; and moral action depends on the individual's desire to preserve an internally and externally consistent self. The exact mechanism translating moral identity to action remains unclear in cat rescuers. However, I posit that childhood experiences, bonding with individual cats, and a strongly developed sense of empathy for nonhumans may contribute to rescuers' actions.

External validation, for example, certainly does not serve as a motivation for action, as these individuals' work is often invisible and devalued. Moreover, Young and Thompson (2020) posit that community cat caretakers experience stigmatized-care fatigue, which is a form of compassion fatigue in which sufferers have little or no institutional support as they perform caretaking that itself is stigmatized or denigrated. For example, community cat caretakers are regularly derided as crazy cat ladies. This prompts them to perform identity work to distance themselves from "truly" crazy cat ladies, who hoard cats in unsanitary conditions. Other accusations serve to challenge the rescuer identity as well. People who do not care for animals, for instance, may marginalize the community cat as not worthy of care, and therefore as a waste of the rescuer's time. Others, including some conservation biologists, believe the outdoor cat to be a threat to the ecosystem and support eradication rather than management. Still others attempt to paint the rescuer as indifferent to human suffering, given their dedication to nonhumans.

The rescuer's second identity transformation, to an agent of change in an indifferent society, arises from this dedication. As detailed above, the rescuer's moral identity motivates action, compelling them to readily act on behalf of community cats in two major ways. First, the rescuer has a strong problem solver identity, manifesting in a prosocial sense of responsibility to care for community cats, members of their social world. Noting a disparity in care for this population, many of my interviewees feel compelled to "do something." This drive toward action is in direct contrast to others in the community, who ultimately express gratitude for the rescuers' efforts, but are not involved in caretaking and may view the cats as nuisances. About half of my participants saw themselves as activists, while the other half eschewed the label. For those who did not identify as activists, they spoke of their on-the-ground work rather than encouraging structural change. Those who do identify with activism described engaging local officials to effect community progress.

Additionally, rescuers work with other rescuers and receive reinforcement through their shared social identities. Even those whose methods differ work together toward a common goal of better lives for community cats, resulting in cooperation, solidarity, and a collective identity. This support is essential to sustain rescuers' sense of commitment to the work, as it may sometimes be challenging. For instance, though the work itself may be highly affective, emotion management is common among community cat caretakers. They engage in emotional shielding through maintaining distance from the cats they work with, as they feel that bonding with each individual cat would take away from their mission for the species.

Rescuers also aim to discuss their work in rational rather than emotional terms to stave off accusations of anthropomorphism, a technique they may use in their roles as educators. For the cat rescuer, education is a critical component of their work, both in service to the work itself,

but also to cats. They aim to portray TNR as a logical solution to community betterment while simultaneously trying to dispel falsehoods about community cats' behaviors and likelihood of carrying disease. Connections may be forged with others who rescuers perceive as sharing their own values; conversely, they may project identities similar to those who view community cats as pests, appealing to their annoyances and offering TNR as a solution.

In the previous four chapters, I have outlined identity transformations among four groups of individuals who engage with cats. While these accounts are certainly not exhaustive in terms of effects on identity, I described for each group one major transformation in relation to cats and one in relation to society, constituting substantive outcomes for both the individual and social selves. In my final chapter, I contextualize my findings regarding my participants' identity transformations in relation to my primary research question and aims. I also consider how my findings align with an anthrozoological viewpoint that centers impacts on domestic cats. I then connect my findings to relevant sociological theories regarding human-nonhuman interaction, personal identity, and social identity. To conclude, I discuss this study's limitations and propose avenues for further research.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

This study examined an overarching question regarding how cats influence identity formation in humans: How do members of different social groups outwardly identifying as having an interest in domestic cats use the same species to construct their personal and social identities? While participants acknowledged numerous identity effects of interaction with cats, for reasons of brevity, this study highlighted one major effect on both personal identity and social identity for each group. Men's personal identities shift in constructing themselves as fathers to cats who are their children, while retaining the cat's personal agency and individuality as co-arbiter of a reciprocal relationship and shared domestic space. Simultaneously, men's social identities challenge notions of cats as "just pets" as they position their cats to others as children in ways that shape family, thereby embodying new ideals of fatherhood and masculinity. Feline veterinarians similarly experience a transformation of self in relation to a being they imbue with agency as they situate cats as co-creators of the veterinary encounter. In response to their experiences within society and the larger veterinary medicine institution, veterinarians position themselves as advocates for cats, an identity that is confirmed through implementing their expertise and interacting with cat guardians and fellow feline veterinary professionals. Cat fanciers' personal identities change in relation to the breed of cat they produce and show, emerging as sentinels of breed traits and historical meaning. They concurrently undergo shifts in how they understand their social repute, aligning themselves with buyers, fellow exhibitors, and mentors while distancing themselves from backyard breeders and hoarders. Community cat caretakers construct their personal identities in relation to cats as subjects of moral concern, taking cues from a robust weave of prosocial and communal values with their sense of self. This motivates problem-solving and educative action to promote change in a society they view as

having failed cats and that remains indifferent to their plight. In describing these identity transformations, my research illuminates the value of traversing symbolic boundaries that separate domestic cats from society, as follows.

BENEFITS TO CATS

In undertaking this research, my most ambitious intention was to improve quality of life for domestic cats through documenting their impacts on development of the human self. Specifically, research supporting the value of granting subjectivity to nonhumans challenges dominant standpoints that objectify other animals. In recognizing the harms of objectification, it becomes possible to envision societal change and greater protection for other species. For the domestic cat—a species toeing the border between acceptable domestication and unruly wildlife—the most impactful potential of this research resides in amplifying the acts of its participants. These individuals actively challenge outdated, stereotypical ideas that preclude a secure place in society for domestic cats through championing their unique characteristics, as well as the promises of intersubjective meaning-making with the species.

I would like to acknowledge here that this manuscript is a fragment of an amalgam of cooperative efforts encompassing diverse actors and institutions. Additionally, the pace of change can seem akin to no movement at all, and such a grandiose vision requires consistent advocacy, monitoring, and strategic pivots. I do not claim this dissertation to be the elusive missing piece of an approach that champions of the domestic cat have invested incalculable time and emotional labor in enacting. Yet I would be remiss to eliminate this aim from my stated objectives altogether. In accordance with my training as an anthrozoologist, focusing on the nonhuman is not merely responsible research; it is an identity alignment much in concert with my participants' concepts of self that compel them to advocate for cats in a variety of ways. In what follows, I

couch some of the value of this research in societal terms. However, for the animal studies scholar, other animals *are* society; thus, benefits flow to human and nonhuman alike.

BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

In some quiet ways, my participants acquiesce to societal stigma related to both being a cat person and the species itself. For example, some interviewees conveyed weariness stemming from defending their love of cats to those who would ridicule them. Others refuse to display identity markers such as cat clothing, décor, and other ephemera. For the most part, however, my participants perform identity work aimed at contesting societal stigma related to cats and those who care for them. My interviewees advocate for the domestic cat while simultaneously contesting societal beliefs and structures that undermine the species and its human proponents. Men, for example, perform a new vision of involved, care-driven fatherhood that encourages displays of emotion and pride in their relationships. Through defying conceptions of men who care for cats as feminine—and therefore weak—men who publicly share their love for cats contest a system of gendered degradation encompassing men, women, caregivers, and the animals themselves. Feline-exclusive veterinarians similarly dispute an entrenched, heavily institutionalized and masculinized system that deprioritizes care for domestic cats. Resisting professional norms not only results in better career satisfaction, akin to a calling for many of these vets; the cats themselves benefit greatly from specialized attention and practices that center their unique needs and individual selves. Cat fanciers, in promoting various cat breeds, draw attention to the species as fulfilling companions with interesting histories. Their roles as surrogate parents and enduring grandparents facilitate human-cat relationships for those who purchase pedigreed cats, providing a contrast to mass facilities and other breeders whose profit motive remains paramount. Those who care for community cats highlight the value of allowing

other animals into one's moral universe, exemplifying empathy for others—especially for those who are most easily discarded. Their efforts on behalf of these widely disregarded cats encourage others to view them as the same animal who lives in American homes and hearts, even as this remains an uphill battle.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

Objectifying views of the domestic cat result from longstanding symbolic boundaries that furthermore encompass those who care for them. Subsequently, negative stereotypes and cultural regard surrounding both human and nonhuman have genuine consequences for both species. For humans, emotional costs of facing stigma may include conflicted identity, resulting in emotional distress. For cats, their very well-being may be at stake as they face less comprehensive veterinary care; higher rates of surrender and euthanasia; and the unenviable status of a simultaneously beloved and reviled creature. The present research speaks to this concern by describing how four groups of people publicly undertake identity work that results in dissolving the boundaries between humans and cats, thus promoting better welfare for both. In engaging with this question, my research contributes to a body of sociological work aimed at centering nonhumans' myriad contributions to society.

The present work positions identity as a throughline with implications for various social structures and constructs. For instance, this study contributes to knowledge about gender through addressing a gap in current research detailing men's identity work with animals other than those used to cement traditional masculine ideals. I contemplate identity work with an animal traditionally coded as feminine, providing a foil to the examination of reinforcing traditional concepts of manhood. This study also has implications for the interfacing of gender and family. Previous research examining the phenomenon of "pet parenthood" overwhelmingly describes

women; however, this study represents the first effort to specifically depict how men enact the nonhuman parent identity. My research additionally contributes to the sociology of labor and work by investigating the original question of how veterinarians construct their identities through working with a single species—and, moreover, a species that is underserved and largely underappreciated by the veterinary institution and individual veterinarians. I add insight to the sociology of leisure through describing the identity work performed by humans involved in the cat fancy—a hobby that carries heavy societal stigma due to both the animal involved and attribution of psychological instability to its adherents. The present research highlights not only how the structure of the hobby creates the cat fancier identity, but how interaction with individual cats bolsters stewardship of a given breed, providing a basis for personal identity formation. Community cat caretakers inform the sociology of emotions—in particular, emotional labor: though they are likely to be cast as altruistic, they face derogatory stereotypes that belie their deeply held sense of moral responsibility. While previous research has focused on the motivations of volunteers who work with cats, my research delves into how identity constructed around cats dovetails with caretakers' personal senses of virtue. Throughout every group's narrative, the cat remains the central figure around which identity takes root and flourishes.

Contributions to Theory

Human-Animal Interaction. Sanders (2003:420) posited that “Theories—be they folk or sociological—are best judged by how useful they are.” Diane Dutton's (2012) three-phase framework for identity transformation via interaction with animals proved an extremely useful scaffold for considering my participants' identities. Throughout this project, I considered my participants' orientation to cats through three psychocultural themes identified by Dutton as characterizing the way Western humans interact with nonhumans: a level of intimacy appropriate

to the relationship; consideration of the nonhuman as an individual; and awareness of the nonhuman's alterity, or their "otherness."

Of these, consideration of the nonhuman as an individual emerged most strongly. As noted in Chapter 3, I took this assumption for granted, as sociological scholarship has convincingly established the ways in which humans ascribe individuality and subjectivity to nonhumans. Nonetheless, my confirmation of this truth bears repeating for the sake of domestic cats, whose overlooked status in research arguably belies their actual importance in people's lives. All of my participants reported, to one degree or another, that they view domestic cats as individuals with agency. Guardians and other caretakers imbue cats with subjectivity, casting them as minded others whose perspectives they can inhabit and act according to the relationship's goals—that is, *being-for* cats. For most participants, these goals entail reciprocal friendship or familial attachment; even those for whom a more detached relationship exists with certain cats reported strong bonds with others. Additionally, veterinarians pursue a healthcare partnership with the cats in their clinics; fanciers raise well-socialized kittens to bring joy to their new families; and rescuers willingly distance themselves from individual cats to best serve the species. On this final note, some identity shifts in this study pointed to different levels of being-for in terms of individual cats versus the species as a whole. In recognition that these orientations may influence identities differently, I propose a continuum that considers the different identity effects of being-for individuals versus being-for species. Such a continuum applied to this study, for example, may look like this:

Figure 1. Being-for Individuals—Being-for Species Continuum



*Fanciers may better be described as "Being-for Breed."

In considering the bounds of “being-for,” I would like to acknowledge Taylor and Sutton’s (2018:481) appeal that “More could be done to highlight the everyday, implicit exercises of (human) power that reproduce inequality between species.” It is critical to recognize that granting individuality—and thus agency—is contingent on the limits of domestication. That is, alterations to a domestic cat’s *telos*—the essential qualities of a species—and *umwelt*—the way each species uniquely experiences the world—are necessary points of compromise if we are to maintain the nature of companionship with the species. This interference disrupts Dutton’s (2012) notion of engaging with the alterity of another species: while we celebrate the domestic cat—even its differences that we find endearing—we tend to do so without recognizing our hand in its creation. Palmer (2013:760) astutely characterizes cats as “problematic citizens,” given their hunting behaviors and reproductive proclivities. Therefore, shaping cats to make them suitable for life in human spaces is perhaps more intrusive than for dogs, whose domestication is considered more complete. For example, owing to the domestic cat’s exploratory and predatory nature, some contend that keeping a cat indoors is cruel. Certainly, the commercial diets available to cats do not compare to freshly-caught prey in terms of nutritional value, nor do they satisfy a cat’s hunting drive. Intervention in the cat’s reproductive cycle is a defining activity for both fanciers and rescuers, though each would maintain they are acting out of love for the species, as would the veterinarians who perform desexing surgeries and the human guardians who request these services. In each group’s estimation, their way of being-for the domestic cat is borne from love and genuine care for the species. Still, I anticipate that no group’s practices are immune to criticism from others. Nor are the groups homogeneous in their beliefs; one rescuer I spoke to expressed that responsible reproduction to maintain breed differentiation is understandable, while another categorically characterized breeders as callous. All groups that I

interviewed, therefore, both resist and reinforce the domestic cat's agency and individuality in ways that simultaneously facilitate relationships and satisfy other human-oriented goals¹.

In facilitating relationships, a combination of close observation, bodily interaction, and heightened awareness of another's presence—that is, *being-with* cats—compels my participants to ascribe to cats the ability to make choices, communicate preferences, experience affect, maintain boundaries, and co-create meaningful relationships. These attributions tended to coincide with participants' descriptions of the closeness of their human-cat relationships during embodied interactions, the precursor to attunement. In Dutton's conception of attunement, a two-way relationship exists between human and nonhuman such that their intentions and actions become inexorably woven together as a result of intimately knowing the other. As with considerations of the limits of observing alterity, alternative forms of attunement may arise depending on one's positionality in the human-companion animal relationship. For example, I found that rescuers' sense of attunement with community cats differs from that of the cats they live with. The cats in rescuers' homes foster attunement with the species; yet I would contend that they maintain a unidirectional sense of attunement with community cats, even though they do not maintain close relationships. Attunement emerges as a recursive process, not a linear one, on the rescuer's part due to differing relationship goals. I believe that Dutton's (2012:102) intention in writing about attunement was to describe relationships where shared intersubjectivity “create[s] a shared conceptual space,” and therefore it may not map perfectly to the rescuer-cat relationship. However, given the strong emotional affect produced, and the ways that rescuers

¹This is not meant to discourage relationships with companion animals. On the contrary, viewing nonhumans as individuals with whom humans engage in intersubjective relationships should provide a guidepost as individuals contemplate their responsibilities within these relationships.

think of community cats as their own, it may be useful to think of this form of attunement as “extended” or “projected” attunement.

Identity Theory. This analysis reinforces key tenets of the study of social identity. In accordance with theory, the identities of those who affiliate with the domestic cat are less likely to be positive than those who affiliate with the dog, the dominant companion species. Each group I interviewed encounters at least some stigma, which emerges in different ways. For example, three of the groups—all except veterinarians—face gendered stigma. Gender, while a remarkable aspect of the veterinary profession’s demographic composition, did not prominently surface as either a liability or an asset in feline veterinarians’ experiences of stigma. Therefore, I confirm that the cat person identity—which warrants further study—intersects with some, but not all, other identities to influence both the degree and kind of stigma experienced. Furthermore, not all groups faced the same degree of threat to identity. Men, for example, appeared to more easily dismiss stigma, noting that it has little impact on their self-concepts or the ways they interact with their cats. In general, veterinarians revealed more irritation regarding negative stereotypes on cats’ behalf than their own. On the other end of the spectrum, many fanciers and rescuers displayed indignation at the more serious accusations cast upon them, especially regarding hoarding. These differing reactions to indictments of character may reveal that men and veterinarians have more social resources to counter identity threat available at their disposal: men benefit from being the dominant gender, while veterinarians’ professional expertise and prestige work to their advantage. On the whole, however, individuals in my study face identity threat and perform identity work to restore their senses of self, including aligning actions, distancing, and hiding aspects of their selves.

Through identity work, my interviewees also create their individual identities in a quest for authenticity, or an internally and externally consistent sense of self that does not vary across roles (Erickson 1995). The individual selves of my participants materialize through interactions with cats when they internalize aspects of the relationship that provide satisfaction to their idealized identities. For example, many of the men in this study described acting as a father-caregiver to their cats alongside eschewing traits aligned with toxic masculinity. Feline veterinarians who describe themselves as advocates do so because they perceive injustice, drawing out the identity with an inclination to correct these biases. The relationships that fanciers build with individual cats become the basis for advocating for unique breeds, while rescuers derive moral satisfaction from helping not only cats, but those with the lowest social regard. The domestic cat thus serves as a lens through which individuals may focus those aspects of their selves that become evident amidst close interaction.

Contributions to Practice

Like sexism, ageism, racism, and other entrenched forms of discrimination, speciesism “legitimizes an existing or desired social order” with ties to power struggles, competition for resources, and economic exploitation (Nibert 2003:8). It is thus incumbent upon researchers of human-nonhuman relationships to consider the various ways in which these oppressions interact to produce injustice. The present study, as noted previously, carries implications for the enactment of gender identity. However, other, more latent effects of the cat person identity’s intersection with other social identifiers and structures may become apparent.

The current research reinforces numerous studies that highlight companion animals’ prominent place in the family structure. Disregarding these findings when implementing housing policy, for example, risks harm to those for whom nonhumans constitute critical social support.

Similarly, it would behoove those who create disaster response policy to consider companion animals' prominent relational and affective roles in many families. Professional structures within the veterinary educational system may benefit from understanding the identity effects that unfold when working with a single species. Several of my participants noted that had they not pursued feline medicine, they would have left the veterinary profession. One remarked—perhaps wryly, but perhaps seriously—that she would have ended her life had she not switched to feline medicine. Given the mental health crisis in veterinary medicine, such a statement is troubling. Furthermore, it points to a deeply-rooted, rigid system that may benefit from a less constraining approach to veterinary specialization. Additionally, feline veterinarians—who pride themselves on their identities as advocates—may serve as an example of how to provide more agency to their patients through making them partners to the extent possible in the healthcare encounter. Both fanciers and rescuers cited laws that may negatively impact their activities and the social structure in which they operate. As both of these groups additionally claimed expertise as part of their identities, actively engaging them in the policymaking process will provide a more complete picture of the impacts of lawmakers' efforts.

Aside from the positive effects for humans, cats too will benefit from greater integration of these findings into practice. Friendlier housing policies, improved safety for companion animals during times of disaster, and more robust protections for community cats are obvious examples of safeguarding cats' physical well-being. However, a less tangible effect of this research exists in the potential for shifting attitudes toward domestic cats, whether they are somebody's beloved feline daughter or a tomcat who wanders the neighborhood in search of his next meal. Wilkie (2015:216) pointed out that research such as the present study is critical, because "By providing accessible information about the multifaceted nature of people's tangible

relationships with animals from the perspective(s) of those engaged in such interactions, scholars can shed fresh light on longstanding debates about problematic human-animal borderlands.” As established previously, these contested boundaries can indeed be problematic for humans who interact with cats, as evidenced by the stigma they encounter. However, cats assume a greater burden with more dire consequences for their lives, especially when they attempt to negotiate human-nonhuman borderlands unsuccessfully. My participants demonstrate how they challenge boundaries between humans and domestic cats, which holds potential to unsettle previously held assumptions and stereotypes—a critical step in enhancing these animals’ lives.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study’s most evident limitation is its homogeneous sample. The overwhelming majority of my participants were white. Furthermore, aside from the group directly sampling those who identify as men, most of my participants were women. Given the implication of the cat person identity interacting with other facets of identity, having a more racially and ethnically diverse sample would provide a clearer picture of these intersections. In addition, among fanciers and community cat caretakers, men’s experiences of resisting stigma—particularly accusations of hoarding—would highlight interesting differences in how the cat person identity interacts with gender.

A second limitation of this research relates to causality—which, while not the focus of qualitative research in general, has some implications for the present analysis given the structure in which I have presented it. Dutton’s framework implies that identity transformation via nonhuman animals is a linear process. This assumption seems to hold true to an extent: I can reasonably contend that interactions with cats lead to attunement with them, and that some identity transformations logically flow from the meanings ascribed through attunement.

However, it could be argued that other individual and cultural influences have as much, or more, impact on certain aspects of identity transformation, particularly in relation to social identity. For instance, the men I talked to could be predisposed to resist overly masculine culture for any number of reasons, and their relationships with cats simply serve as a convenient outlet for this ongoing project. I thus present the disclaimer that I am not aiming to establish direct causality; the domestic cat does, however, serve as a focusing subject—perhaps one among many—through which identity transformations are enabled. This study’s aims and conclusions are not compromised by this limitation, but it should be noted to avoid conflating my claims with causality attributed solely to interaction with cats.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Stemming directly from the first limitation of this study, understanding of what constitutes the cat person identity will help construct knowledge of how people position themselves in relation to the cat, as well as the social implications of the identity. Though I asked what the term “cat person” means to each of my interviewees, the question was not central to the present study. Continuing this avenue of questioning can lead to better understanding of how humans experience stigma, as well as how stigma toward nonhumans is projected onto the humans they associate with. Overall, this will contribute to knowledge about constructing and claiming identity via other animals, an area that is currently underrepresented in sociological literature. This is an important topic for study, given that scholarship exists on how identity is constructed with significant other humans, but not via the nonhumans who play similarly critical roles. Once a clear picture of the cat person identity is built, research may progress toward examining how it intersects with other aspects of identity, as different experiences of stigma require distinct strategies for resistance and identity work. In practice, knowledge of how these

approaches play out can inform companion animal welfare agencies as they tailor services to various communities, as well as individuals, through social and psychological interventions.

Another implication for further research to inform practice relates to the veterinary medical industry. My discussions with veterinarians yielded a significant amount of information about the various ways domestic cats are underserved in companion animal medicine. This relates little to individual identity—though it at least in part relates to the collective veterinary industrial identity—but emerged in discussions nonetheless. In an effort to ensure cats receive the best care possible, I propose a multi-phase study examining the veterinary industry at all levels—from individual feline veterinarians to educational institutions to pharmaceutical companies and beyond—to examine where gaps exist in prioritizing feline health. I also recommend engaging cat guardians to gain a complete picture of the interactants involved. This research should proceed from a sociological viewpoint to ensure bridging of micro-interactions and macro-level phenomena; however, it would greatly benefit from partnership with scholars representing veterinary medicine, business, public administration, and organizational psychology.

Lastly, greater anthrozoological insight that centers cats' experiences is critical to ensure these findings remain relevant to their interests. This would best be served through observational research that seeks to inhabit their viewpoints so we “can get even closer to the feline gaze” (White 2013:97). For example, my research can be used as a basis for investigating the points at which cat behaviors create resistance to the cat person identity, as well as their relation to cats' demonstrations of agency. Multispecies ethnography, a burgeoning area of qualitative methodology, can provide greater insight as to how to best prioritize the nonhuman's viewpoint

and interests in research fields that have traditionally examined humans to the exclusion of other species.

* * *

In the preceding manuscript, I have described individual and social identity construction among four groups of people who outwardly label themselves as caring for domestic cats. Additionally, I have portrayed the work performed by these individuals to maintain these identities. My research is not new in the sense that I am the first to document close relationships between people and their companion animals; I am not even the only researcher who has examined intersubjectivity with cats. However, my research is among the first to document the important ways in which cats shape people's individual and social identities, in varying and sometimes conflicting ways. Yet cats are still considered to be an inferior animal, and those who interact with them are stigmatized, sometimes to their own detriment, and often to the cat's detriment. Through confirming the domestic cat's prominent role in people's relationships, professions, and identities, this study provides a more complete picture of the profound effects that companion animals have not only on individuals, but on society through individuals' identity work. In my grandest visions for this research, these findings help to elevate cats from their objectified, conflicted status to that of friend, family member, and sympathetic co-citizen with whom we co-create the world.

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Appendix A Recruitment Messages

Men: Reddit Users

Hi there! My name is Jessica Austin, and I'm a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Sociology. I found your profile through the MenSmittenWithKittens subreddit, and I would like to invite you to take part in my dissertation research.

My research examines how people include domestic cats as part of their identities, and one of the key groups I am studying is men who openly display their relationships with their cats on social media. The ultimate goal of the project is to position cats as important social actors in people's lives; an additional goal is to dissolve some of the negative stereotypes surrounding them.

Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will take place over Zoom or via telephone and will be recorded with your permission. Please be assured that I will respect your privacy; all respondents will be assigned pseudonyms in my dissertation and any subsequent publications. I will be the only researcher with access to the data, which will be stored in a protected folder on my personal computer. Finally, you will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Please email me at jess.austin@colorado.edu to let me know if you are interested. Once I receive your confirmation, I will email you a consent form, along with the link to schedule the interview. Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Jessica

Men: Twitter/Instagram Users

Meow! Calling men 18+ who proudly share their love of cats on social media! You are invited to participate in an interview study about how cats are part of your identity. Interested? Please contact [jess.austin](mailto:jess.austin@colorado.edu) at colorado dot edu for details. #catman #catdad #catguy

Feline Veterinarians

Greetings, Dr. (Last Name),

My name is Jessica Austin, and I'm a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Sociology. I found your name through the American Association of Feline Practitioners website, and would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research.

My research examines how people include domestic cats as part of their identities, and one of the key groups I am studying is veterinarians who specialize in feline medicine. The ultimate goal of the project is to position cats as important social actors in people's lives; an additional goal is to dissolve some of the negative stereotypes surrounding them.

Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will take place over Zoom or via telephone and will be recorded with your permission. Please be assured that I will respect your privacy; all respondents will be assigned pseudonyms in my dissertation and any subsequent publications, and your responses will be yours as an individual, not construed to represent the views of AAFP or your employer. I will be the only researcher with access to the data, which will be stored in a protected folder on my personal computer. Finally, you will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Please email me at jess.austin@colorado.edu to let me know if you are interested. Once I receive your confirmation, I will email you a consent form, and we can schedule a mutually agreeable time to conduct the interview. Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Jessica Austin, MPA, MS
University of Colorado Boulder
Department of Sociology

Cat Fanciers

Hello, (Name) –

My name is Jessica Austin, and I'm a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Sociology. I found your name through (the Cat Fanciers' Association/The International Cat Association) website and would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research.

My research examines how people include domestic cats as part of their identities, and one of the key groups I am studying is cat fanciers. The ultimate goal of the project is to position cats as important social actors in people's lives; an additional goal is to dissolve some of the negative stereotypes surrounding them.

Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will take place over Zoom or via telephone and will be recorded with your permission. Please be assured that I will respect your privacy; all respondents will be assigned pseudonyms in my dissertation and any subsequent publications, and your responses will be yours as an individual, not construed to represent the views of (CFA/TICA). I will be the only researcher with access to the data, which will be stored in a protected folder on my personal computer. Finally, you will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Please email me at jess.austin@colorado.edu to let me know if you are interested. Once I receive your confirmation, I will email you a consent form, and we can schedule a mutually agreeable time to conduct the interview. Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Jessica

Community Cat Caretakers

Good afternoon, (name) –

My name is Jessica Austin, and I'm a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Sociology. I found your name through the Feral Friends Network on the Alley Cat Allies website and would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research.

My research examines how people include domestic cats as part of their identities, and one of the key groups I am studying is those who care for community cats. The ultimate goal of the project is to position cats as important social actors in people's lives; an additional goal is to dissolve some of the negative stereotypes surrounding them.

(Begin with first sentence if contact is in Florida; if in Colorado, leave out.) Though I am in Colorado, my research began with a participant in Florida, so it made sense for me to contact other Florida residents to recruit interviewees. Your participation would involve an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will take place over Zoom and will be recorded with your permission. Please be assured that I will respect your privacy; all respondents will be assigned pseudonyms in my dissertation and any subsequent publications, and your responses will be yours as an individual, not construed to represent the views of any organization you are affiliated with. I will be the only researcher with access to the data, which will be stored in a protected folder on my personal computer. Finally, you will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Please email me at jess.austin@colorado.edu to let me know if you are interested. Once I receive your confirmation, I will email you a consent form, and we can schedule a mutually agreeable time to conduct the interview. Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Jessica

Appendix B Interview Guides

Men

1. Describe your relationship with your cats. Who are you to them, and who are they to you?
2. Do you consider yourself a “cat person”? Why or why not?
 - a. If yes: What does that mean in terms of your self-concept?
 - b. If no: What does the term “cat person” imply that doesn’t apply to you?
3. Can you think of a story that illustrates a “turning point” in your relationship with cats, when you realized you are a cat person, or that you have a special relationship with them?
4. What is it about cats, specifically, that adds to your life?
5. What feelings do you experience as a result of sharing your cats on social media?
6. How do you think others perceive you based on the photos you share of your cats or yourself with your cats?
7. How important is it for you to be perceived as traditionally masculine?
8. Do you think your outward relationship with your cats influences how others view your masculinity? Why or why not?
9. In a 2020 study, college-age women looked at dating profile pictures of two college-age men. One picture depicted a man alone. Another depicted a man holding a cat. Overall, the women who participated in the study rated the men as less dateable when they were holding cats. Why do you think this is the case?
10. Has there ever been a time in your life when you did not like cats?
 - a. If yes: What changed your mind?
 - b. If no: How has your interaction with cats changed over your lifetime?
11. Aside from social media, where else in your life—*and how*—do you share or discuss your relationship with your cat(s) (e.g., among friends, at work, with family, etc.)?
 - a. If respondent indicates they do not do this → Why not?
12. You’ve told me a lot about the different roles in your life. If you had to rank them, where would you place the role of (cat dad, cat caretaker) in terms of your personal identity?

Feline Veterinarians

1. Tell me about your journey to specializing in feline medicine.
 - a. (If not covered): Were there any experiences in vet school that influenced your decision to specialize in feline medicine?
 - b. (If not covered): What is it about cats, specifically, that inspired you to work solely with them?
2. Do you work with any other initiatives specializing in cat wellbeing—for example, with shelters or with community cats?
 - a. If yes: Why is this work important to you?
3. How do you think your experiences as a cat vet differ from general companion animal vets?
4. What is the best part of interacting with cat parents all day? The worst?
5. How do you think the general public perceives cat vets?
 - a. (If not covered) Why do you think your clients specifically seek out a vet who specializes in feline medicine?
6. How do you think other vets perceive cat vets?
7. How would you characterize your role in the larger feline veterinary community?
8. Is there anything you would change about the feline medicine community?
9. Do you consider yourself a cat person?
 - a. If yes: What does that mean in terms of your self-concept?
 - b. If no: What does the term “cat person” imply that doesn’t apply to you?
10. (If yes to the previous question) How does your personal identity as a cat person contribute to your professional role?
11. How has your concept of yourself as a cat person changed since becoming a cat veterinarian?
12. Do you have cats at home?
 - a. If yes: How do your cats at home contribute differently to your self-concept than the cats who are your patients?

13. How does your role as a cat veterinarian influence the other roles in your life?
14. You've told me about the different roles in your life. Reflecting on the way you think about yourself, and not necessarily their importance to you, where would you place your role as a cat veterinarian in terms of your personal identity if you had to rank them?

Cat Fanciers

1. Tell me about how you came to be involved in cat breeding and showing.
 - a. (If not covered) What is it about cats that made you decide to show them specifically?
 - b. (If not covered) How did you decide which breed of cats to breed and show?
2. Describe your relationship with your cats. Who are you to them, and who are they to you?
3. Can you think of a story that illustrates a “turning point” in your relationship with cats, when you realized you are a cat person, or that you have a special relationship with them?
4. How does your role as a cat fancier influence the other parts of your life?
5. Do you consider yourself a cat person?
 - a. If yes: What does that mean in terms of your self-concept?
 - b. If no: What does the term “cat person” imply that doesn’t apply to you?
6. Tell me what it means for you to be associated with CFA/TICA.
7. (**If leader**) What does it mean to you to be a (**TICA**: breed committee chair/**CFA**: breed council secretary)?
8. Tell me about your work when your cats are in a breeding cycle.
9. Tell me what a typical show day involves for you.
10. What does it feel like to win an award at a show?
11. What do you think your cats’ experiences at shows are like?
12. How has your involvement with the cat fancy changed over time?
13. Describe your interactions with other competitors at cat shows.
14. What do you personally gain from interacting with other cat fanciers, whether at shows or during other activities?
15. Is there anything you would change about the cat fancy community?
16. How do you think people who are not involved in the cat fancy perceive you?

17. What are the top three things you want outsiders to understand about you as an individual in the cat fancy community?
18. You've told me a lot about the different roles in your life. If you had to rank them, where would you place the fancier role in terms of your personal identity?

Community Cat Caretakers

1. What is it about cats that inspired you to begin working in community cat caretaking?
2. In what ways do you think this work influences your self-concept?
3. How has your involvement in the world of cat caretaking changed over time?
4. How does your role as a cat caretaker influence the other roles in your life?
5. How would you characterize your role in the larger community of cat caretakers?
6. Is there anything you would change about the cat caretaking community?
7. How do you think people who are not involved in cat rescue perceive you?
8. What are the top two or three things you want others to understand about your role as a rescuer?
9. Do you consider yourself a cat person?
 - a. If yes: What does that mean in terms of your self-concept?
 - b. If no: What does the term “cat person” imply that doesn’t apply to you?
10. (If yes to the previous question) How does your personal identity as a cat person contribute to your role as a cat caretaker?
11. (If yes cat person) Can you think of a story that illustrates a “turning point” in your relationship with cats, when you realized you are a cat person, or that you have a special relationship with them?
12. Do you have cats at home?
 - a. If yes: How do your cats at home contribute differently to your self-concept than the cats who you rescue?
13. Do you consider yourself an activist? Why or why not?
 - a. Probe: Which other cat issues do you take action on? Describe what activities you’re involved in.
14. You’ve told me about the different roles in your life. Reflecting on the way you think about yourself, and not necessarily their importance to you, where would you place your role as a community cat caretaker in terms of your personal identity if you had to rank them?