Cat Culture, Human Culture: 
An Ethnographic Study of a Cat Shelter

Janet M. Alger
SIENA COLLEGE

Steven F. Alger
COLLEGE OF ST. ROSE

This study explores the value of traditional ethnographic methods in sociology for the study of human-animal and animal-animal interactions and culture. It argues that some measure of human-animal intersubjectivity is possible and that the method of participant observation is best suited to achieve this. Applying ethnographic methods to human-cat and cat-cat relationships in a no-kill cat shelter, the study presents initial findings; it concludes that the social structure of the shelter is the product of interaction both between humans and cats and cats and cats and that the observed structure represents, to a large degree, choices made by the cats. The study also concludes that, within the cat community of the shelter, a distinctive cat culture has emerged, which represents the cats’ adaptation to the particular conditions of shelter life. Specifically, the shelter allows for the emergence of higher order needs and goals that stress affection, friendship, and social cohesion among the cats rather than territoriality and conflict. The study further argues that traditional animal researchers have mistaken the relative equality of cat colonies for a lack of social structure, as opposed to a different structure from that found in sharply ranked nonhuman animal communities.

In his editor’s introduction to the first issue of Society & Animals, Shapiro (1993) notes that the development of academic subfields often parallels progressive social movements, and he gives as examples Civil Rights, Feminism, and Environmentalism (p. 2). It should not surprise us, then, that the Animal Rights Movement, rooted in the breakdown of the boundaries that humans perceive between themselves and other animals (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992), has stimulated a considerable body of research on human-animal relationships and has brought about a reevaluation of sociology’s traditional assumptions about the relationship between
humans and animals. This re-evaluation has even begun to find its way into introductory textbooks, some of which include sections on the “culture” and “social structure” of nonhuman animals (Stark, 1992; Henslin, 1995).

The potential impact of this new research on sociological theory can be seen in recent studies that have investigated the ability of nonhuman animals to engage in symbolic interaction. Traditional symbolic interactionists, beginning with Mead (1962), have taken the position that language is a prerequisite for symbolic interaction; thus, alingual animals were excluded from serious sociological consideration. Challenging this viewpoint is Sanders’ (1993) research on human-canine interaction, in which he found that dogs, “are effectively involved with their caretakers in routine social exchanges premised on the mutual ability of the interactants to take the role of the other, effectively define the physical and social situation, and adjust their behavior in line with these essential determinations” (p. 221). Likewise, our own study of human-feline interaction (Alger & Alger, 1997a) found numerous instances of interaction rituals (Collins, 1989) between cats and their caretakers, unimpeded by the absence of common language.

Those who reject the reductionist or behavioristic approach to explaining animal behavior must confront the question of how we come to know the animal mind. Arluke and Sanders (1996) argue for an ethnographic approach adapted to the study of nonhuman animals. They also advocate “the massing of diverse data from settings in which people and animals interact in order to build a general, sociologically informed description of human-animal exchange” (p. 51).

In keeping with this agenda, the study reported in this paper is an ethnographic account of the culture and social structure of a no-kill cat shelter, in which we attempt to go beyond behavior to some understanding of the inner lives of the animals under study. This social system in many ways reflects choices made by the cats in interaction with the human staff and with each other. As such, it should help us achieve some insight into the inner lives of the animals involved.

**Ethnography and the Study of Animals**

Achieving insight into the inner lives of others, or intersubjectivity, calls for the ethnographic approach of participant observation in which, as Arluke and Sanders (1996) note, “the fieldworker tries to grasp the meanings of the subjects’ behavior by seeing things from their point of view” (p. 19). According to Forrest (1986), the participant observer method has evolved over time. Studies conducted prior to the 1960s were concerned about the objectivity of the participant-observer and emphasized his/her need to guard against an over-involvement that might adversely
affect judgment. Consider Whyte's (1967) statement regarding his study of the cornerboys in *Street Corner Society*: "I tried to avoid influencing the group because I wanted to study the situation as unaffected by my presence as possible" (p. 305). For these earlier researchers, intersubjectivity was achieved primarily through informants such as "Doc" in *Street Corner Society* (pp. 298-9). In these cases, the informant is the one who has achieved intersubjectivity and is able to relay the understood meanings to the researcher.

**Intersubjectivity through Experience**

Since the 1960s, a new model of participant observation has emerged, which Forrest (1986) calls "apprentice-participation" and Adler and Adler (1987) refer to as the "complete membership role" (p. 67). Here the researcher attempts to become the subject by having close relationships with subjects and fully participating in their world. Only by becoming a "native" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 67) can one hope to understand subjective reality. In this model, then, the investigator achieves intersubjectivity directly through his/her own experience, rather than through informants.

Forrest (1986) and Adler and Adler (1987) were of course addressing the study of humans. For us, the question then becomes how can we achieve intersubjectivity with the nonhuman subjects in the community under study, given our species differences—including the lack of a common language. Here we would agree with Arluke and Sanders (1996) that there are many indications that the otherness of nonhuman animals is not impenetrable. We would argue that humans and animals do achieve an operative understanding that not only makes routine interactions possible but also provide insights into the animal mind.

A number of human gestures, for example, seem to be interpreted similarly by cats. Thus, slapping your leg when sitting down is generally interpreted by cats as an invitation to sit in your lap. Beckoning is recognized as meaning, "come over here." Cats quickly come to recognize what’s wanted in a game of peek-a-boo and will alternately look for you and hide. Whether these responses are because of prior experience with humans we don’t always have the information to say. Cats also create signals for humans to learn that then become part of future interactions. Our cat Nicky wrapped his tail around our legs whenever he wanted food. We soon learned the meaning of this gesture and could address his need.

As can be seen from Nicky’s behavior, cats, at least, are not passive recipients of human attention. They greet you and make demands based on successful past interactions. When we misinterpret them, they often correct us. For instance, some
cats will slap you if you stop petting them, to indicate they want you to continue. Others will try to move your hand to where they want to be scratched or follow you, vocalizing until you give them a preferred food. Their interactions with each other are also often understandable because of such overlap in human/animal expression of emotion and intent. For all these reasons, it can be counter-productive to emphasize unduly the differences between us and those companion animals with whom we have such a long history of inter-species communication.

A Valuable Tool for Reducing Uncertainty

In addition, we are not helpless in the face of uncertainty in inter-species communication. The ethnographic method is a valuable tool for reducing uncertainty where it exists. First, as indicated earlier, among the things we can observe are the choices the animals make in their interactions with each other as well as with humans. Here we would agree with Dawkins (1987) that we can gain insight into the minds of nonhuman animals by observing them making choices. Dawkins conducted studies of battery hens, egg-laying hens who are crowded into tiny cages with sloping wire floors. She was trying to find out if these hens were suffering, as maintained by critics of factory farming. Her approach was to “ask the animals” by experimentally creating conditions in which the hens could “reveal” whether or not they were suffering by their choice of preferred living conditions.

Second, the ethnographic method allows for repeated observation of the same animals over time. This enables the observer to revise and refine his or her interpretations. Third, unlike the laboratory, ethnographic research in more natural settings provides a non-threatening atmosphere in which the animals can relax and be themselves. Fourth, there may be other humans in these natural settings, such as the shelter volunteers in our study, with whom we can check our interpretations. Fifth, the ethnographic method allows the time to learn animal gestures, expressions, and sounds that can be used in a variety of ways to further one’s understanding. For example, to gain greater acceptance among the feral cats in his study, Tabor (1983) used such knowledge to behave like them.

Finally, ethnographic research usually involves the collection of both verbal and non-verbal data. Many ethnographers stress non-verbal communication as a major contribution of ethnography, distinguishing it from quantitative studies that omit non-verbal data. They argue that the majority of human communication is, in fact, non-verbal and, thus, to leave out such data is to distort the meaning of human interaction (Hammersley, 1990; Scheff, 1986). Such data are even more central and
critical to the study of animals. Thus, the use of a method that incorporates non-verbal communication should further our understanding of inter-species communication as well as communication among animals themselves.

In summary, we believe that, at least in humans and domestic animals, an operative understanding born of long association and evolutionary similarity allows us to interact routinely in a manner that grants satisfaction to all involved. This understanding works well for all practical purposes and can be enhanced and improved upon through the use of the ethnographic method. Where we are most likely to go wrong is not in our failure to understand the everyday material and social needs of animals but in our failure to understand what may be their higher needs for such things as variety, aesthetic enjoyment, and association with kin and friends (Busch & Silver, 1994).

Human-Animal Intersubjectivity and Anthropomorphism

In previous papers (Alger & Alger, 1996; Alger & Alger, 1997b), as well as above, we have attempted to address the skeptics who deny the possibility of human-animal intersubjectivity. For those still inclined to dismiss human-animal research as anthropomorphizing, we would like to focus for a moment on the sociological significance of the concept of anthropomorphism.

We believe that anthropomorphism is best understood as a distancing concept intended to obscure the real intersubjectivity that exists between human and nonhuman animals. For the nonprofessional, to be accused of anthropomorphism is to be accused of sentimentalism; for the researcher, bad science (Kennedy, 1992). We would argue that, in fact, the concept serves powerful interests in limiting our knowledge of the natural and well-documented empathy between species.

To understand how this is so, it is important to realize that speciesism is even more embedded in our society than is racism or sexism. As difficult as it has been to eliminate the latter two from our lives, the elimination of speciesism would leave no aspect of our culture or institutions untouched. Our major ideological orientations emphasizing the superiority of humans over nonhumans would be out the door with their powerful religious and secular defenders. The scientific, economic, and educational institutions that routinely use animals would be particularly hard hit and face major reorganization; the American lifestyle in terms of diet, clothing, and entertainment would be drastically altered. In short, our belief that anthropomorphism must be avoided at all costs is central to our very way of life. It allows us socially to construct beings, who can be used, unimpeded by moral considerations.
Those we call animals can be experimented on, forced to work for us, exploited for our entertainment, and eaten. It allows us to forget our common evolutionary background and the enormous number of similarities between us.

The Research Setting

The cat shelter under study, which has been in existence for over 25 years, is currently housed in a five-room apartment in a two-family house owned by one of the shelter officers. It takes in primarily stray, abandoned, and abused cats and maintains them until homes can be found for them. If homes are not found, they can stay at the shelter indefinitely. It is a no-kill shelter, in that euthanasia is considered only when it is the sole humane alternative available, as in the case of terminally ill cats with painful conditions or when the cat has an incurable, communicable disease such as leukemia. Even then, the shelter will attempt to place that cat in a home where other such cats are already living.

Shelter policy is made by the two co-presidents and a board of directors who have determined such things as what kinds of cats will be accepted in the shelter, the maximum number of cats the shelter can hold, and adoption screening and follow-up procedures. The shelter has a veterinary service that cares for all the cats and is located near the shelter. Food and litter are obtained from local supermarkets that allow the shelter to salvage supplies still wholesome but too damaged to be sold. Finally, the shelter puts on many events in the community that keep donations coming in throughout the year.

All those associated with the shelter, from the presidents on down, are volunteers. The major positions in the organization, in addition to the presidents and board, are the volunteer coordinator, cleaner-feeders who come in twice a day to feed and clean up after the animals, and hugger-lovers who come in specifically to give attention to, and socialize, the animals. In addition, the most closely involved volunteers are responsible for administering prescribed medications, arranging adoptions, following up on adoptions, fielding calls from people who want to place cats at the shelter, arranging public events for the shelter, and picking up supplies and storing them. Although a few of the volunteers are students or retired people, most of these extraordinary people have full-time jobs; many have families and are involved in other community activities.

We first made our acquaintance with the shelter under study in 1989 when one of the authors found an abandoned mother cat and her kitten on campus. The shelter seemed unique in many respects and we became increasingly involved, first as volunteers and later as board members. Although we were not members of the
shelter community when we began our study, we easily reassumed membership, based on our prior involvement. In this respect, our fieldwork role comes closest to what Adler and Adler (1987) call the “opportunistic complete member researcher” (1987, p. 67) and what Hayano (1979) calls “auto-ethnography.” We were re-entering a familiar situation in which our membership was fully recognized and accepted by the other shelter volunteers. Our prior experience as cleaner/feeders in the shelter, as well as our membership in a multi-cat household, also eased our way into the shelter’s cat community. We knew how to behave among cats.

Our fieldwork role was aided in one other important respect. As indicated, the roles at the shelter are many and varied. As long as you are committed to the goals and philosophy of the shelter, a role can be found for you. When we re-entered the shelter, we did not resume our former roles. We created a new role, the cat researcher. This role was readily accepted by the shelter officers and the other volunteers, not only because of our past contributions to the shelter, but also because they knew that, for us, the goals of the shelter always came first. Our unique position at the shelter also allows us to avoid the role conflict that sometimes occurs with opportunistic complete member researchers. Because we were able to create the cat researcher role, we did not have to add that on to a pre-existing role. On those occasions, however, when emergencies arise or the shelter is short-handed, we do put down our notebooks and pitch in.

The Cat Colony at the Shelter

The shelter admits a maximum of 60 cats and is almost always full. New residents are placed in cages in a separate room until they can be evaluated by the veterinarian, neutered, and given their shots. A second room is reserved for sick cats, who are caged as well, so they can rest and be given their prescribed medications. New cats who have been evaluated as healthy by the veterinarian are moved to large cages in one of the main rooms. Here, they can see the other cats and interact with them from the safety of their cages until they are ready to join the main body of cats who are free to roam the two main rooms, the kitchen, and the closed-in porch where the litter pans are kept.

All cats are given names, and everything that is known about their history before and after arrival at the shelter is recorded in loose-leaf notebooks that the volunteers can consult when necessary. In addition, there is a picture on the wall of every resident cat with the cat’s name and a color coded sticker that tells volunteers whether a cat is feral and not handleable, semi-feral but making progress, or
friendly and fully handleable. The relationship between volunteers and cats tends to be very cat-centered. These volunteers are serious cat people who, like the owners in our earlier study, view cats as autonomous beings whose wishes should be respected as much as possible. Unlike many dog owners, they view the idea of training or managing their charges as a violation of their nature.

The shelter, then, constitutes an artificially created cat colony with human attendants oriented toward interpreting and catering to the wishes of the cats. This unique setting, neither natural colony nor traditional household, provides an excellent opportunity to move forward the ethnographic study of human-animal and animal-animal relationships. To begin with, through our complete access to the shelter, all the traditional sources of ethnographic data (Prus, 1996) are available to us. We can observe, engage in participant observation, and interview informants. Although we cannot interview cats in the traditional sense, we can construct histories and form our own relationships with individual cats.

Secondly, the shelter provides a setting in which the cats are free to make choices. They are free to associate with specific other cats, all other cats who are available, or to be alone if they can find a spot for themselves. They are free to interact with humans or not as they choose, though the humans try to interest feral cats in interacting with them in the hope that they will become adoptable. They are free to express themselves in a wide variety of ways with each other and with the human volunteers. The only inhibition placed on them involves violence. They are not allowed to fight with each other or attack humans. This is a rare phenomenon, and, at present, only one cat at the shelter has to be caged for time outs on occasion, because he picks on more timid males. They are allowed food choices in that many different kinds of food are provided. If a cat expresses a preference for a food that is not normally provided, an effort will be made to acquire that food. It is even expected that their adoption preferences will be considered, and attempts are made to place cats in compatible settings. In addition, as the reader will see, friends are not normally separated through adoption.

Finally, the shelter provides an opportunity for long-term study of the interaction patterns between humans and cats and among the cats themselves. This will not only allow us to observe the emergence and maintenance of culture and social structure within the shelter but also to develop intimate knowledge of individual cats. Only by observing particular cats over long periods can we avoid the reductionist tendency of traditional behaviorists to see animals as simply representatives of a species, rather than as unique individuals.
Theoretical and Methodological Orientation

Hammersley (1990) notes that ethnographic research emphasizes "theoretical description," and there are several interpretations of the meaning of theoretical description in the literature. One of these sees ethnographic descriptions as applications of theory, in which one applies existing theories to one's current research in order to elaborate and refine the theory or extend it to a new area of inquiry. In this view, the role of theory in ethnographic research would be to help the researcher move from the "meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are" to "what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such" (Geertz, 1973, p. 27). Our study is essentially in this tradition, in that we have previously applied the theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction to human-feline relationships, redirecting and elaborating it in the process. In our current study, we will continue to apply this modified perspective to human-feline relationships and, additionally, to the relationships cats have with each other.

Three Hypotheses

As Mary Midgley (Arluke & Sanders, 1996) has noted,

The attempt to make pre-programming account for everything has only been made to look plausible by constant misdescription—by abstract, highly simplified accounts of what creatures do, which are repeatedly shown up as inadequate when anybody takes the trouble to observe them longer and more carefully. (p.43)

Thus, the following statements comprise our first working hypothesis: (a) Humans and cats and cats and cats engage in symbolic interaction; (b) cats possess at least a rudimentary ability to take the role of the other and use this understanding to shape their interactions to achieve both practical and social goals; (c) rather than being imprisoned in the present, cats have a sense of both past and future; and (d) these understandings do not depend on the existence of human-type language. Rather, symbolic interaction fundamentally is rooted in a combination of keen observational skills and emotional bonds and intuition. These enable the cats to develop a common definition of the situation and construct shared meanings.

It is our second working hypothesis that, if cats can engage in such symbolic interaction, they will, given time, produce elements of culture or social organization such as norms, roles, and sanctions. A group of cats over time in the same
setting will produce a web of socially transmitted behaviors that constitute that
group's solutions to the problems it faces. "'Animals have no culture,' wrote
Konrad Lorenz ... But on the contrary, animals most certainly do have culture. We
fail to realize this for no better reason than that our experience with populations of
wild animals is so severely limited we are not often in a position to see much
evidence of culture. Worse yet, we have been conditioned to believe that if we have
seen one group of elephants ... we have seen them all, so we don't even search ...
for cultural differences" (Thomas, 1994, p.110)."Culture in cats ... is less obvious,
yet it is there all the same" (p.110).

Our third working hypothesis is that the social organization of the shelter is the
outcome of the interaction among the cats and between the volunteers and the cats,
in which the values and expectations of the cats are taken into account. Thus, we
believe the interaction patterns and culture we will find at the shelter will have
unique elements that will not be found in other settings in which domestic cats
congregate, as well as elements that will be found in all cat colonies.

*Focus of Observations*

Given this theoretical orientation, we decided to focus our observations on the free-
roaming cat residents of the shelter because they are the ones permitted the most
choices that can structure interaction. Our earliest visits to the shelter suggested that
the best situations to focus on that would reveal elements of symbolic interaction
and normative patterns among the cats themselves would be feeding and eating
routines, resting and sleeping arrangements, exchanges of grooming and affection,
and other friendship association patterns such as those involved in play. The best
situations for the study of human-cat relationships would be feeding and eating
routines, medication routines, affection and grooming sessions, and adoption
sessions.

The two major variables held constant in the shelter setting are courtship and
mating routines—since all free-roaming cats are spayed or neutered—and serious
competition for food, since an adequate supply of wet and dry food is available to
all. We should also note that kinship among the cats is rare. Important variables
operating in the setting are length of residence (old-timers versus newcomers),
degrees of feralness, gender, and age—though all free-roaming cats are adults.
These variables will have to be taken into account when looking at the role of
interaction in producing social outcomes. In short, this is a study of the non-sexual
social conduct of a cat-cat, cat-human community in which competition for
survival is not a factor.

*Society and Animals*  
*Volume 7, Number 3*
Our specific observations are guided by our working hypotheses and do not constitute a "reproduction" of shelter life (Hammersley, 1990). The shelter is a highly complex social structure. Among the things we are not systematically observing are the relationships the volunteers have with each other and the interactions the volunteers have with the sick and new cats who are caged and isolated. Rather, our observations are focused on the population and routines indicated above that, in our judgement, are most likely to yield data relevant to our working hypotheses.

We began our formal observations of shelter life in the spring of 1996, and are still engaged in data collection. We visit the shelter twice a week during volunteer shifts to observe the human-feline interactions as well as interactions among the cats. Since there are two of us, our ability to observe and record the routines of interest in this complex setting is greatly enhanced.

The Human-Cat Community: Enforcing Cat-Initiated Norms

We discovered very early in our observations that the cat-centered volunteers at the shelter were really part of the community and not outsiders engaged in human-cat relationships. That is, most of the volunteers imposed their will over the free-roaming residents (acted as humans) only in exceptional circumstances. Otherwise, they acted as members of the community, enforcing cat initiated choices and obeying cat initiated rules. One example of this occurs during feeding. The cats are fed twice a day, and this involves several dishes of dry food, water, and five to six large plates of wet food spread around the kitchen floor. Throughout our association with the shelter, two or three cats have always indicated a preference to be fed separately, and they are invariably accommodated. At this writing, the three cats getting special feedings are Cimmeria, the oldest cat in the shelter, Kemet, and Danny. Consider the following typical observation of an evening feeding session:

Feeding has begun in the kitchen and there are about 15 cats waiting. Cimmeria is in her usual place on top of the microwave on the food counter. As Sandy [a volunteer] opens each can, Cimmeria sniffs it waiting for just the right dish. When she indicates her preference, Sandy makes a small plate for her alone. One of the other cats jumps on the counter and Sandy gently sets him back on the floor. Kemet, meanwhile, is making it clear that he will only eat in the sink by repeatedly jumping in and licking the empty cans that have been placed there. Sandy offers Kemet a small dish to himself in the sink. Danny, who has been rubbing against Sandy's legs
jumps on top of the large cabinet where food is stored. As Sandy prepares a small dish for him, one of the shelter officers who is passing through the kitchen comments: “Danny has most of the shifts trained to give him a special dish of food.”

Another example of humans enforcing cat initiated choices can be seen in cases of cat friendships. When two cats choose each other as friends, the volunteers generally facilitate this friendship in two ways. First, they will maintain places where the friends can associate or sleep together. For instance, Bibbiana and Lisa were strays who met at the shelter and became close friends. At first, neither cat could be handled by volunteers, but over time they became less timid and fearful. When we began observing the feeding routines, we noticed that they hung out in an empty litter pan near the kitchen entrance. As we stood by the doorway to watch the feeding, they attracted our attention by staring and stretching their necks toward us. Janet reached down and stroked Bibbi, whereupon Lisa strained toward her to be petted as well. This led to our observing them more closely, and we noticed that the empty litter pan was always provided for them and the two of them never left the litter pan at the same time. When one ate, the other stayed in the pan. Our own involvement in supporting this friendship can be seen in the following excerpt from our field notes:

Upon arriving at the shelter we notice that Bibbi and Lisa are missing and that their empty litter pan is not in its usual place. One of the co-presidents happens to be there and Janet tells her about their attachment to the empty litter pan. The president asks one of the volunteers to bring over a clean litter pan and as soon as it is in place, Bibbi and Lisa materialize and sit in it.

A second way in which the volunteers act to maintain cat friendships is in their policies on adoption. When it is clear that two cats have become close friends, the shelter will adopt them out only as a pair. We observed this in the case of Calvin and Hobbes, two orange cats who came into the shelter together and were inseparable. A couple came to the shelter looking to adopt, and when they chose Calvin alone they were refused and told that Calvin and Hobbes had to go together. When we asked specifically about Bibbi and Lisa, the co-presidents assured us they would be adopted out only as a pair.

There are instances in which cat desires are thwarted, but this is generally done for the good of the cats. One example of this has to do with what we call “soft
places.” These are blankets, towels, cat beds, and furniture with cushions which, when available, are the preferred choices of the cats for sleeping and cuddling. In our observations at the shelter, we have seen a struggle between those who want to provide soft places for the comfort of the cats and those who want to eliminate the soft places because of concerns about hygiene and the spread of disease—serious problems in a shelter. We recently took a stand on this issue by lobbying successfully to preserve the blankets and towels on top of the cages in the front room as soft places where cats could gather to socialize and sleep.

The Cat-Cat Community: Affection, Friendship, and Social Cohesion

Following Leyhausen (1979), Tabor (1983) notes that animal behaviorists have been obsessed with the study of aggression and individual territory, seeing aggression as a means of maintaining ownership of a territory and its food supply. Both provide evidence that such behavior is often modified in practice to meet different goals under different conditions. Tabor (1983) goes on to note that studies of affection and similar socially cohesive forces among cats are very rare. This is so, even though his observations found many more instances of affection than aggression among free-living cats. He concludes that, perhaps, “aggressive acts are easier to identify” (p. 75) than positive actions which may be more passive—such as “a group of cats sitting quietly together near each other” (p. 76). Tabor does indicate that the cats he has observed have a rather strong sense of personal space that, if broached, may result in a warning of some sort being issued. He further notes that cats who are kin tend to have the fewest barriers between them.

Our long association with the shelter has yielded so few instances of aggression among free cats that we would have a short study if that were our focus. Rather, we want to contribute to understanding the far more frequent instances of affection, friendship, and social cohesion that we have seen. There are two main settings in which we have been able to observe such positive interactions. The first would be the cage-top resting areas. In the front room are two large, multi-level cages that house new cats who have been inoculated, spayed/neutered, and declared healthy by the veterinarians. The cats remain in these cages until they indicate a readiness to join shelter life. The wire tops of the cages are covered with blankets to provide resting places for the free population and to get the caged cats accustomed to the presence of other cats. The second setting is the various chairs, cat beds, and cat shelves that are scattered throughout the two front rooms.
The Cage Tops

The following observation of cage-top behavior is typical:

We arrive at the shelter and find seven cats on top of the big cage. Scamper and Alice are snuggled together on one side and Carly, Jenny, Logan, Phillip and Merlin are snoozing on the other side all touching each other. Jenny gets up and moves in between Logan and Phillip and settles down against both of them. Tess, who was on the shelf near the big cage, jumps on the cage top. None of the others show any reaction. She sniffs Phillip and then snuggles in between Phillip and Merlin.

There are always cats on top of the cages, often seven or eight to a cage. If that number of cats were equally distributed, there would be, perhaps, four inches of space around each cat. But, instead, they sit entwined and sandwiched together without the slightest regard for personal space. In these positions, they wash each other, sleep, and sit together; in one instance, a male went through coital motions with a female who sat there calmly throughout the experience, making no effort to move away. Acts of aggression among the cats on the cage-tops are rare. That this is not the case with all cats can be seen from the reactions of new cats as the residents climb to the top. Susie, for instance, who is currently in a top cage, rushes to the edge of the cage and hisses, snarls, and swats at the cats on their way up. As for the background characteristics of the cage-top cats, there are ferals and non-ferals, males and females, and young and old cats. Further, many cats are involved, not just the same few each time. Over the course of our observations we have identified 51 different cats on the cage tops. Length of residence at the shelter seems to be the only background factor operating here; the majority of cage-top cats are old-timers. Although there are occasional episodes of hissing between old-timers and new-comers, we have never seen any cat driven off the cage-tops by other cats.

It is our hypothesis, then, that a social structure of the cage-tops has emerged in the course of interaction among the cats at this shelter. That structure fosters affection, cooperation, and friendship. These norms are sufficiently important to those involved that they are willing to forego normal considerations of personal space. Sanctions are largely positive in that he or she who cooperates may be groomed, have someone to snuggle with, or have a safe comfortable environment in which to take a nap. Such social goals may be important to these cats who have known starvation, injury, abuse, and loss.
Beds, Chairs, and Sleeping Spots

Cats also rest and sleep in the many cat beds, baskets, cat shelves, chairs, and other human purpose surfaces in the shelter. Some beds, baskets, and shelves are designed to fit one cat while others can easily accommodate two or three cats. Every time we visit the shelter we record instances of multiple cats sharing these various sleeping spots.

Cats who are known to be friends by shelter staff and who can be observed by anyone to be very friendly with each other, will often sleep, rest, and/or groom together in a cat bed meant for one. Usually, two cats, such as Cedric and Mickey, are involved in this behavior, but we have seen three cats sleeping together in a bed for one. On one of these occasions, when the trio heard the feeding begin, they all left for the kitchen together and, sandwiched together with sides touching, ate dry food from a double dish.

Many cats will seek to sleep in an occupied bed even if it is a bed for one and other beds are available. Geraldine, a young short-term resident with a spinal injury that proved fatal, frequently sought to sleep in beds occupied by other cats. On one occasion she nuzzled into a single bed to sleep with Chelsea who immediately woke up and sniffed Geraldine, who had soiled herself and did not smell very good by human standards. Chelsea, however, accepted her presence, which she indicated by going back to sleep, whereupon Geraldine pushed her face into Chelsea’s flank and went to sleep. Some time later she awoke to find Chelsea gone. Chelsea had decided to get some dinner. Geraldine then left that bed and tried to enter Tara’s bed. Tara swatted her and kept her from settling there.

Many cats, like Chelsea, are very tolerant of varied sleeping partners and seem to attract other cats like Geraldine, who want to cuddle but do not have a special friend of their own to join them. As a consequence, Chelsea and cats like her rarely have a bed to themselves for long. A few, like Tara, will not permit other cats to join them. Still others, like Merlin, resist sharing their beds at first but eventually come around.

Discussion

Several things are worth noting from our observations of the cage tops and sleeping spots. First, friendship pairs are very common in the shelter, and all the present friendship pairs we have been able to observe so far are of the same gender. These friendships are expressed in a variety of ways including cuddling together, grooming each other, eating together and, in the case of Bibbi and Lisa, maintaining
a common space together—a form of cooperative behavior in which the norm operating is that only one of the friends should leave the common space at a time. None of these cats knew each other before entering the shelter, and none of them are kin.

Second, personal space seems to be a minor consideration for many of the cats at the shelter. This is true not only for cats who are friends but also for cats who take part in the cage-top social groups at any given time and for many of the cats occupying the soft places available in the shelter. It is our hypothesis that this willingness to forego personal space is related to three factors of shelter life: (a) the absence of competition for food, (b) the safe environment of the shelter, and (c) the crowded conditions of the shelter.

Examining Needs and Goals

Looking first at food and safety, let us consider Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs for humans. He argues that humans first seek to satisfy their need for food, then seek to satisfy their safety needs. Only when these primary needs are met will humans seek to satisfy their need for belonging and love. Like humans, cats have a broad range of needs that have different priorities under different conditions. In addition, as with humans, food and safety take precedence over other needs. At the shelter, however, food is plentiful, varied, and regular. In addition, the shelter is a safe environment, and cats are protected from the major sources of injury and disease they face as strays. With these practical needs, and the goals they give rise to, satisfied (Alger & Alger, 1997a), social needs and goals become dominant, just as in the case of humans. In particular, they seek physical contact, affection, friendship, and enjoyment of various sorts. Even feral cats pursue such social goals through the formation of colonies (Tabor, 1983) and in the social gatherings observed by Leyhausen (1979).

The third factor involved in the dominance of social needs and goals among the shelter cats is the crowded conditions at the shelter. Except for brief periods when the rate of adoptions has been high, the shelter is always at capacity, which can mean approximately 40 to 50 cats freely moving about four small rooms and another 10 to 20 cats in cages. In the absence of competition for food and in the safe environment of the shelter, the crowding seems to be used by the cats as an opportunity for close physical and social contact. This is quite at odds with the findings of Leyhausen (1979) who argues that cats placed in crowded conditions will become aggressive (pp. 232-240). Leyhausen’s data, however, come from
experimental situations designed to maximize anxiety and insecurity in the studied population. The shelter cats, on the other hand, have often been rescued from threatening situations, nurtured by shelter staff until they are recovered, gradually socialized to the shelter before becoming part of the free population, and made as comfortable as possible. Some of them have had prior experience as members of a feral or household cat colony.

Thus, the shelter is characterized by a high degree of social cohesion rather than aggression. This cohesion is fostered by the cats’ freedom to pursue social goals as well as the emergence of norms of tolerance for physical closeness in a crowded setting. The shelter staff have often observed that the cats who adapt least well to shelter life are cats who have come directly from homes as a result of the death of their human companion or other misfortune. For these cats, all of whose needs were being met in their previous homes, the shelter is not an occasion for the emergence of higher needs or tolerance for physical closeness. During our period of observation, a cat named Bandit came into the shelter from precisely such a situation. While he was caged, he hissed and snarled at other cats, just as Susie does now. When he stopped doing that and was allowed out of his cage for the first time, he sat at the kitchen door swatting every cat who passed by. Other times he sat by himself looking lost. Slowly, he began to adapt, but we were all thrilled when he was adopted because everyone recognized his unhappiness. His new human companion has indicated Bandit is now quite content.

Transcending Kinship

Returning to the core points that might be made from our description of affection, friendship, and social cohesion in the shelter, we would note that, unlike Tabor (1983), we have not found friendship and disregard for personal space to be limited to cats who are kin. None of the cats we have been discussing are related to each other.

Thus, the capacity for friendship and the enjoyment of physical closeness in the domestic cat transcends kinship. It also is not restricted to juvenile cats, since the majority of the cats we have been discussing in this section of the paper are mature adults from 4 to 10 years old. Nor is it restricted to cats who knew each other as juveniles, since all these cats came into the shelter as adults and met at the shelter. Our best hypothesis is that the environment of the shelter facilitates the display of these feline capacities to a greater degree than other previously studied settings. Finally, some cooperation between domestic cats is possible, as witnessed in the
activities of Bibbi and Lisa who protect their personal resting spot from potential encroachers. How extensive or common such displays of cooperation are we are not yet prepared to say.

Finally, as regards animals and symbolic interaction, it is our hypothesis that the cage tops, beds, and chairs represent to the cats not just soft places for sleeping, but safe places to relax, to be oneself, and to find intimacy. This shared meaning is one that has emerged through interaction among the shelter cats themselves. Thus, the cats have, essentially, redefined objects in their environment and this can be viewed as a rudimentary form of symbolic interaction.

**Conclusion**

Because we are reporting on a study still in process, our interpretations and conclusions must be tentative. With regard to the cat-human community, our initial findings indicate that the social structure of the shelter is the outcome of interaction between humans and felines rather than one imposed on the cats by humans. This can be seen most clearly in those instances when humans enforce cat initiated choices.

Concerning the cat-cat community, our initial findings seem to be at odds with most of the traditional research on cats, which emphasizes their solitary nature and fails to find structure in their communities. Even enlightened behaviorists such as Leyhausen (1979, pp. 232-235) tend to define social structure in terms of ranking. Thus, when they fail to find ranking in cats, they conclude that cats are less social. Tabor (1983, p. 6) notes that because animal researchers have been preoccupied with territoriality, aggression, and ranking, they have failed to study other kinds of behavior. This tendency may also be affected by the fact that aggression and ranking are easier to observe using positivistic methodologies. However, positive cohesive forces such as affection and friendship are no less structured than hierarchy. The difference is that rather than being imposed by a dominant animal, they are negotiated through symbolic interaction. This means there will be more variation in cat communities, not because cats are less social, but because they are more egalitarian. This also highlights the need for an ethnographic approach, because the animals need to be comfortable in order to be themselves and be willing to reveal such capacities to an observer.
Note

1. Correspondence should be sent to Janet M Alger, Sociology Department, Siena College, Loudonville, NY 12211. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for several suggestions to improve the paper.

References


