

Book review — Boekresensie

Pets and our mental health: the why, the what and the how

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In the growing study field of human–animal interaction, and in particular the study of the therapeutic value of animals for humans, *Pets and our mental health* casts a refreshing new perspective on anthrozoology.

While the beneficial effects of human–animal interaction, particularly on humans, has gained much popular support over the past few decades, real theoretical scientific evidence of such benefits has been mostly lacking. In addition, much of the research to date has focused more on the beneficial effects of human–animal interaction on humans than on the effects on the animals involved.

In this book, the author describes in a clear and concise manner a scientific experiment, and its findings, which addresses these shortcomings. The discussion of the findings is preceded by four introductory chapters that provide the reader with the necessary background information and insight leading up to the actual experimental design, methods and interpretation of the results. The last two chapters contain a critical analysis of human–animal interaction theories and their practical application.

The introductory chapters each cover specific topics which follow on one another, but can also be read independently. The first chapter gives a brief overview of the history of human–animal interaction studies. The chapter on personology lays the foundation for the later in-depth examination of human–animal interaction, by summarising and interpreting various interaction theories, culminating in a thought-provoking motivation for the inclusion of human–animal interaction theories in human and natural sciences.

Chapter three deals with human–animal interaction in the context of human–human interaction. Social behaviour and the basic need for attention as a prerequisite for successful social interaction and the applications of these principles in the intra-species symbiotic relationship are some of the issues covered. An objective approach is taken in that the potential negative effects of human–animal interaction are also acknowledged.

Chapter four provides an excellent chronological and literature review on animal-facilitated psychotherapy. Although throughout the preceding chapters subtle connections are made with physiological aspects of interaction, the fifth chapter

deals with this topic in more detail. The theories of positive interaction are linked to specific neurotransmitter and hormone mechanisms. This chapter is particularly useful for the practicing veterinarian interested in the physiology of human–animal interaction.

Chapter six describes the experimental methods for establishing physiological support for human–animal interaction theories. The experimental design and terminology are clearly explained and motivated. In chapter seven an objective review of the results of the experiment is given with the conclusion that interaction with animals could have a positive emotional effect on humans, based on the physiological parameters measured in the experiment.

The eighth chapter analyses the theories of human–animal interaction critically and reviews the existing theories. In the last chapter, the practical application of these theories is covered by objectively considering the factors that play a role in the therapeutic use of animals. A comparison between animal-facilitated psychotherapy and drug prescription places the role of animals in human psychotherapy in perspective in a novel entertaining manner.

Each chapter is summarised in either diagrammatic or tabular form, enabling the reader to capture the main essence of the message communicated in a visually effective manner. A comprehensive reference list at the end of the book adds a final professional touch to an excellent publication.

Pets and our mental health takes the international study of human–animal interaction one step further towards real scientific, physiological evidence of the benefits of human–animal interaction to both people and animals. Human and animal healthcare professionals with an interest in the therapeutic effects of human–animal interaction will find it compelling reading. The fact that this important work comes from a South African veterinarian, is significant and highly commendable.

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