

# Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

Furry babies or felines? **Vicky Halls** investigates...

I am known to often remark that many years ago, as a child, I enjoyed watching a programme on television called *Animal Magic* about life at Bristol Zoo. The presenter, a zookeeper called Johnny Morris, was a charming man with a great sense of humour and a unique style of recounting tales of the animals in his care by giving them voices. In this way 'conversations' could be had between keeper and his charges to add to the entertainment value of the programme. I so enjoyed the 'talking animal' game that, years later, I would use this technique in my days working in cat shelters and later in veterinary practice to amuse my co-workers. Even now, Mangus – my delightful Devon Rex – 'answers back' as I have my own personal two-way conversation, one half of which I attribute to her. It makes for a lot of fun – I do blame Johnny Morris! – but I have always accepted that it isn't real and doesn't truly represent the thoughts and feelings of any animal I interact with. If I did believe I was merely giving a voice to a cat to express genuine sentiments, I would be guilty of anthropomorphism. This word describes attributing human thoughts, behaviour and motivations to non-human things, such as other species or inanimate objects. It is not uncommon for humans to be anthropomorphic when relating to their pets, as it is a frame of reference with which we are familiar – we have never lived as another species so it is very hard to be able to truly imagine what goes on inside their heads. So, is anthropomorphism a bad thing for our cats?

The human/cat relationship has developed and grown extensively over the last 50 years and bears very little comparison with the concept of pets when I was a child. As society becomes more fragmented and people more isolated, we turn towards our pets for comfort and the bond becomes more complex as a result. Demands are made of the relationship

and an emotional element is sought, possibly to compensate for something lacking in the nature of contact with other humans. Modern surveys of the pet-owning population in the UK show that cats and dogs are considered to be members of the family and a significant amount of time, money and effort is put into their care. This is, of course, a good thing in most respects and cats are living longer, healthier lives as a result. However, there are times when attributing human thoughts and feelings to our beloved felines may not be in their best interests.

## 'Soulmates'

Recently I visited Sylvia, who was extremely worried about her beautiful tabby called Emmy. Sylvia had split up with her husband and moved with Emmy to a smaller house in a different part of the country to start a new life. She described her relationship with Emmy as 'soulmates' and felt that, providing they were together, everything was alright with the world. However, shortly after moving, she was shocked to find that everything was definitely not all right with Emmy's world as she had taken to over-grooming and creating bald patches on her legs and abdomen and spending most of her time under the bed. Sylvia's vet had failed to find a physical reason for Emmy's itchy skin and therefore referred her to me for further investigation.

During the course of my consultation in Sylvia's home, I had the opportunity to take extensive history about her life with Emmy and observe the nature of their behaviour towards each other. One thing that struck me was Sylvia's preoccupation with making sure she knew where her little cat was at any time and her desire to demonstrate her love. Emmy would be brought into the room by her owner and held tightly until she managed to wriggle her way out of her arms. Emmy would then rush out of the room – in search of a private place, no doubt – only to be followed shortly afterwards by her owner to repeat the process all over again. Sometimes during the course of a consultation, it is necessary for me to challenge owners – in the nicest way possible – regarding some observed behaviour that may be outside their awareness or if the nature of a particular comment or use of words requires further exploration. In this case I was interested to understand why Sylvia was so agitated about Emmy being out of sight. She explained that she

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couldn't bear to think that Emmy felt rejected and that her constant hiding was seen by Sylvia as a 'cry for help' and a desire to be held, cuddled and physically reassured. She felt that Emmy had picked up on her emotional upset regarding the divorce and house move and she wanted to make sure Emmy understood that Sylvia was actually coping. She had a strong sense that love would conquer all and Emmy would feel better if she understood how much she was loved and appreciated.

## Feline perspective

During our discussion, it was apparent that every comment regarding Emmy and her behaviour was viewed and interpreted from a very human point of view. Many complex human emotions were being attributed to her and used as explanatory suggestions regarding her behaviour. Unfortunately in this case, such comments were less than helpful and a way forward had to be found that enabled Sylvia to understand Emmy's emotional state from a feline perspective.

I explained that, despite the intense nature of their relationship, Emmy was a cat with motivations and emotions that were appropriate for her species. Much as I could sense that it grieved Sylvia somewhat, I talked about the characteristics of the species: territorial, predator and prey, self-reliant, risk averse, solitary, highly aware and so on and focused on how the move and Sylvia's attentive behaviour could be perceived. It was very hard for Sylvia to hear this, but the key to Emmy's recovery lay in her owner understanding that her beloved cat really wasn't a little person in a zip-up furry coat.

We spoke for some time about the nature of the species and why cats behave in certain ways in response to perceived danger and threat. It was important that every expression of Emmy's mood was interpreted in this new feline way. Everything had to make sense for Sylvia, otherwise any programme of change put in place would be doomed to failure.

Eventually we agreed that, for Emmy's sake, Sylvia would learn to love a little differently in future. Emmy had been removed from familiar territory and placed within a new and challenging environment where the only thing that she recognised was her owner. Unfortunately her owner was behaving strangely – in Emmy's view – and the constant focus, picking up, removing from hiding places and general increase in attention, felt overwhelming and highly stressful. Emmy had turned to a predictable behaviour, grooming, as a form of self-comfort, during what was a very challenging time.

A programme was put in place that allowed Emmy to control the social interaction; she was left to hide should she wish and was not disturbed. If she approached Sylvia, she was given brief attention and not smothered. Sylvia started to play with her

and introduced objects to the home that stimulated Emmy's feline desire to hunt, climb, forage and explore. An appreciation of Emmy's natural needs, as a cat, helped Sylvia to realise that loving a cat can and should be expressed very differently from loving another human being. Emmy improved enormously and her fur soon grew back and she no longer needed to sleep in hidden places all the time as the sense of threat from Sylvia had subsided.

A change from an anthropomorphic viewpoint to one that embraces the cat as a different species does not mean that the quality of the relationship between owner and cat will diminish. Learning to love your cat differently is equally rewarding!

## Guarding against anthropomorphism

- Learn as much as possible about the cat as a species and appreciate the differences!
- Observe your cat's behaviour and interpret it based on feline motivation and not human
- Cats like to control interaction so watch out to ensure that your approaches are well received
- Cats like to hide occasionally to sleep uninterrupted, don't take it personally! ●



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