ABSTRACT. Although pet interacters from a sample of 250 persons over 50 years of age generally report receiving more intense uplifts than hassles from their pets (Chi Square = 26.7, \( p < 0.001 \)), there are also differences seen within this group. More specifically, differences are seen in regard to relationships between reported hassles and uplifts from pets, and socializing, life situation, and gender. For example, pet interacters who report a great deal of uplift from pets also report doing things with friends more frequently than do interacters who report only slight uplift from pets (\( t = 2.38, \ p < \ 0.05 \)). Importantly, pets also appear to serve different roles for female and for male pet interacters, and for pet interacters in different circumstances. Uplifts from pets are associated with leisure and lack of psychological pressure for females, but are related to hassles with social interactions, time, and money for males. Contrastingly, females who report hassles from pets report hassles in the areas of free time, money, and health, but uplifts from social interactions. Human interactions with pets frequently contribute to quality of life and these interactions merit further study.

There is a growing interest in pets as contributors to quality of life, especially in older persons. This emerging literature suggests that aspects of pet interaction may interact with happiness (Ory and Goldberg, 1983), buffer one from stress (Siegel, 1990), and even increase longevity (Friedman et al., 1980). Further, in the elderly, levels of attachment to pets have been related to differences in depression and health for pet interacters (Garrity et al., 1989). For example, strong attachment to pets has been associated with lower levels of depression.

However, other research has suggested that pets have no direct effect on quality of life or well-being, but operate indirectly. For example, Hendy (1987) has proposed that it is the human factor, e.g., social facilitation of the human pet escort, and not the pet per se that increases positive behaviors in older nursing home residents who are given time to interact with a pet (and the escort person).

And still others find no effects at all for pet interaction. Grossberg et al. (1988) find no support for pet influence on measures of stress.
Lawton et al. (1984) find no effect of pet interaction on psychological well-being and Robb and Stegman (1983) find no effect of pet interaction on health. Thus, one might argue (a) that pets provide direct benefits to psychological and physical well-being, (b) that pets provide indirect benefits by increasing our interactions with other humans, or (c) that pet interaction is of little, if any, benefit.

Other studies reveal additional complexities in our understanding of the role of pet interaction. Cameron and Mattson (1972) found that pet interacters tended to prefer pets to people, but others have found that there is a positive relationship between affection for pets and affection for people (Brown et al., 1972; Hills, 1989). Enhanced psychological health has been reported for pet owning women living alone, but not for women living with others (Goldmeir, 1986). Thus, it is not at all clear to what degree pets are a substitute for lack of human companionship versus being an additional enrichment to the variety of one's life.

A majority view is that pet interaction is an important adjunct to quality of life in many older persons and may partially meet needs of companionship, sense of worth, and sense of control. At the same time, pet interaction is a potential hassle and a source of stress to the older person. Finally, while there is an increasing appreciation of the complexity of pet interaction effects, there is little evidence of male and female differences in relationship to the benefits and costs of pet interaction. The purpose of this paper is to look at characteristics of the pet owning group. Importantly, we will examine the gender differences and life circumstances that discriminate older persons who get more benefits (uplifts) or more costs (hassles) from pet interaction, and those who do not experience these pet interaction effects. The data should be useful in considering whether or not to recommend pet interaction to a particular person.

METHOD

The present research is part of a larger longitudinal program that was designed by Staats (1989) to increase hope and expected quality of life in non-institutionalized older persons. The information relating to feelings about pets was derived from questionnaire data in the larger project.