

People of Diverse Genders and/or Sexualities Caring For and Protecting Animal Companions in the Context of Domestic Violence

Violence Against Women

1–20

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1077801218809942

journals.sagepub.com/home/vaw

Nik Taylor¹, Damien W. Riggs¹, Catherine Donovan²,
Tania Signal³, and Heather Fraser⁴

Abstract

This article reports on a thematic analysis of open-ended questions about how humans respond to violence directed toward animals in the context of violent human relationships, derived from an Australian–U.K. survey of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. From the 137 responses, three major themes were identified: (a) animals are an important source of support, (b) humans actively protect animal companions, and (c) witnessing animal abuse can trigger leaving violent relationships. The findings offer unique insights for practitioners into the help-seeking needs of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities who live with animal companions in the context of domestic violence.

Keywords

gender and sexuality diversity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer family violence, animal companions

¹Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

²The University of Sunderland, UK

³CQUniversity, Rockhampton, Australia

⁴Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Nik Taylor, School of Human Services, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand.

Email: nik.taylor@canterbury.ac.nz

Introduction

Decades of research has focused on domestic violence in the context of heterosexual cisgender relationships (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Johnson, 2008; Yllo & Bograd, 1990), and over the past three decades there has been a slow but growing trend toward researchers also considering experiences of domestic violence among lesbians and gay men (e.g., Barnes & Donovan, 2016; Edwards, Sylaska, & Neal, 2015; Island & Letellier, 1991; Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2002). This latter line of research challenges the assumption that domestic violence only occurs when cisgender heterosexual men are physically violent toward cisgender heterosexual women who are their partners. Over the past decade, this growing body of research has also turned to explore the experiences of bisexual people (e.g., Head & Milton, 2014; M. L. Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013) and transgender people (Guadalupe-Diaz & Koontz Anthony, 2017; Rogers, 2017).

The past three decades have also seen a focus on “the link” between animal-directed and human-directed violence in the context of violent human relationships (e.g., Becker & French, 2004). This research has demonstrated that animals are often used to control human victims, and that many women who live with animal companions remain in violent relationships due to fears over their animals’ fate if they are to leave them behind (Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999). This same research also shows that animals themselves are often victims of violence, and that they suffer physically and emotionally, including through being separated from their human companions, whether temporarily or permanently (Flynn, 2012). Finally, research in this area has shown that the deep bonds between humans and animals can help human victims begin to overcome trauma (Becker & French, 2004).

However, still missing and requiring attention is research on “the link” in the lives of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. In the context of heterosexual cisgender relationships, the link has been clearly demonstrated, but to date, almost no research has explored the link in the context of the relationships of people of diverse genders and sexualities. Addressing this gap in the literature, the current article reports on findings from a survey of 503 people of diverse genders and/or sexualities living in either Australia or the United Kingdom. In this article, we explore the 137 responses that were provided to open-ended questions that invited participants to elaborate on how they responded to witnessing the abuse of an animal and the roles that animal companions play in their lives. Before presenting the findings, we offer the readers context by providing an overview of literature in three areas. First, we briefly summarize research on the link between human- and animal-directed violence. Second, we consider the small body of literature focused on the scope of human–animal relationships in the lives of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. Third, we briefly summarize the literature on domestic violence in the lives of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities, focusing specifically on barriers to recognizing domestic violence in their relationships, and the various forms of identity abuse that can be experienced. Reference will also be made to the few studies that have included a focus on animal companion abuse.

Having then presented findings from a thematic analysis of the open-ended questions, we conclude by considering what the findings suggest for service provision and future research.

Literature Review

“The Link” Between Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA)

The “link,” as it is commonly referred to, describes a connectivity between violence directed at nonhuman animals and concurrent or subsequent violence directed at humans (e.g., Arluke et al., 1999; Becker & French, 2004; Onyskiw, 2007). Original conceptualizations of the link promoted a causal relation, that is, that early witnessing of, or engagement in, animal abuse by children leads to violence against both humans and animals in adulthood (e.g., Wax & Haddox, 1974). This “graduation thesis,” however, has been vigorously debated (e.g., Arluke et al., 1999; Gullone, 2014; G. Walters, 2013), and researchers have increasingly focused instead on animal abuse as part of a wider dynamic of antisocial and violent behavior directed at marginalized or vulnerable others (Dadds, Turner, & McAloon, 2002).

One area that has seen a great deal of recent research is the positioning of animals within violent intimate partner or family relationships. Repeatedly, studies have demonstrated higher rates of threatened and actual harm of animals in families where violence is occurring (e.g., Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). Within this dynamic, animals can be deliberately targeted for harm by the abuser to maintain the human victim’s compliance and silence or to punish perceived wrongs committed (e.g., Collins et al., 2018; DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). The close emotional bonds that exist between many human victims and their animals (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007; Fitzgerald, 2007), coupled with isolation from other sources of emotional support, mean that threats of harm to beloved animals are a particularly effective abuse tactic (Upadhy, 2014). Such violence may also be an indicator of risk posed by the perpetrator, with Simmons and Lehmann (2007) finding, from their sample of 1,293 women seeking refuge from male violence for themselves and their animal companions, that heterosexual cisgender men who also targeted family animals utilized a greater range and severity of aggressive violence, including emotional and sexual violence and stalking, than perpetrators who targeted human victims alone.

That concern for the well-being of their animals (or “fellow sufferers”; Fitzgerald, 2007) often results in victims delaying leaving, remaining in, or returning to violent relationships has been well documented (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007; Faver & Strand, 2003; Newberry, 2017). Indeed, concern for the well-being of any animals left behind is acknowledged by some service providers as a significant barrier to leaving violent situations (e.g., Wuerch, Giesbrecht, Price, Knutson, & Wach, 2017), with increasing focus on the need to provide refuge for all victims of DVA (e.g., Collins et al., 2018). In part, this acknowledgment comes from a recognition of the strong bonds between (some) humans and their animal companions.

The Scope of Relationships Between People of Diverse Genders and/or Sexualities and Animal Companions

According to a 2016 national survey, approximately 62% of Australian households include at least one companion animal (totaling more than 24 million animals), with 38% of households having at least one dog and 29% at least one cat (Animal Medicines Australia, 2016). For both cats and dogs, “companionship” was the most commonly given reason for acquiring the animal, and 65% of all households saw their dogs/cats as part of the family. A similar pattern has been reported in the United Kingdom, with an estimated 13 million (46% of all) households including animal companions, with the animal companion population standing at approximately 57 million (PFMA, 2016). While these (and similar) reports provide detailed information regarding the likely age, gender, income, and/or parental status of animal companion owners, there is much less information regarding the rates of animal companions in the households of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. Even less focus has been paid to the role of animal companions within the lives of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities.

In one of the few studies in this area, Putney’s (2014) research with 12 older lesbian women suggests that animal companions offer the possibility for nonjudgmental relationships, with this being particularly important for participants who had grown up during a time when lesbianism was socially unacceptable. In addition, some of her participants, who were socially isolated due to illness, reported that their animal companions reduced their sense of loneliness. Similarly, findings from HIV Futures Seven (Grierson, Pitts, & Koelmeyer, 2013) suggest that for many HIV-positive gay men, companion animals are a significant source of support, with 63% of the 1,058 participants indicating this. This theme of animal companions supplementing human relationships is one that we explore in more detail below, specifically with regard to the relationship between experiences of human- and animal-directed violence.

Violence in the Relationships of People of Diverse Genders and/or Sexualities and Their Animal Companions

Existing research suggests that experiences of domestic violence across all sexualities and genders are very similar, involving physical, emotional, financial, sexual, and identity-based violence (Donovan & Hester, 2014a). Key differences in the experiences of those of diverse genders and/or sexualities compared with their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, however, reflect the discriminatory context in which the former live (Barnes & Donovan, 2016). Thus, perpetrators who engage in identity-based abuse can draw on societal tropes which position people of diverse genders and/or sexualities as pathological, deviant, immoral, or in other ways problematic to undermine, punish, and/or control their victims. For example, abusive partners or family members may threaten to out their victim (Brown & Herman, 2015; Grant et al., 2011; Guadalupe-Diaz, 2013; Head & Milton, 2014; Ristock, 2002).

Other types of identity-related abuse include that which undermines a person's sense of themselves. For example, Donovan and Hester (2014a), in their sample of 746 people in "same-sex" relationships, found that respondents under the age of 35 years were more likely than older respondents to report being accused of not being a "real" gay/lesbian person. This group was also more likely to be threatened with "outing" and/or having their sexuality used against them (Donovan & Hester, 2014a). Sexual abuse can also be a form of identity abuse. Bisexual people have reported being either expected to enter polyamorous relationships or being forced to be monogamous (Head & Milton, 2014). Transgender people have reported being expected to continue to engage in sexual behaviors associated with their pretransition selves (e.g. Roch, Morton, & Ritchie, 2010). Gay men have reported pressure to engage in unsafe sex and open relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2014a). Renzetti (1992) has reported that dependency and jealousy are prevalent issues in abusive lesbian relationships, and that this can be partially explained by gendered expectations of more emotionally intense relationships.

The discriminatory contexts in which people of diverse genders and/or sexualities live affect their experiences in terms of help-seeking practices in response to domestic violence. Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub (2005) suggest that help-seeking is a nonlinear process including recognition of the problem and naming it, making the decision to seek help, and selecting a provider of help. For people of diverse genders and/or sexualities, all three aspects of this help-seeking process might be hindered because of the discriminatory context in which they live. The heteronormative and cisgenderist presentation of domestic violence has been identified as a key barrier to those of diverse genders and/or sexualities identifying, naming, and therefore seeking help for their experiences (for an overview of the literature on help-seeking in North America, see Guadalupe-Diaz, 2013).

In the context of the United Kingdom, Donovan and Hester (2014a) have discussed the impacts of what they call the public story about DVA that not only describes a cisgender, heteronormative problem, but also describes a particular victim "story": one that is feminized, passive, weak, and nonagentic. Not seeing or recognizing their relationship experiences in this framing is one reason that people of diverse genders and/or sexualities might not seek help from mainstream agencies. Another barrier to help-seeking is that those of diverse genders and/or sexualities who experience domestic violence fear unsympathetic, inappropriate, and/or discriminatory responses if they are to report to mainstream organizations (Barrett & Sheridan, 2017).

The abuse of animals in the context of the violent relationships that some people of diverse genders and/or sexualities experience has received scant attention to date. While in their survey Donovan and Hester (2014b) found that just over 4% of their sample of 746 reported ever having been in a relationship where their pet was abused, and 1.5% reported this in the previous 12 months, interviewees were not asked for further details. Consequently, it was not explored whether feeling responsible for animal companions in an abusive relationship was another factor influencing a self-perception of being the stronger—emotionally at least—partner rather than the weak victim. Renzetti (1992) also asked about the abuse of pets in her pioneering survey of

lesbians who had experienced domestic violence and found that 38% reported their pet had been abused; however, similar to Donovan and Hester (2014b), no further investigation of this finding took place.

The current study aimed to begin to fill this gap in existing research by considering the roles of animal companions in the lives of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. This included a focus on links between human- and animal-directed violence and on the supportive roles animal companions may play.

Method

Participants

The data reported in the current article are derived from a larger mixed-methods survey. In the survey, people of diverse genders and/or sexualities aged 18 years and over living in either Australia or the United Kingdom were recruited to complete a questionnaire via posts on social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook), in emails shared via organizations (i.e., the LGBTI Health Alliance), and in emails to listservs (i.e., human-animal studies). Of the 503 participants, 258 lived in Australia and 244 lived in the United Kingdom. In analyses of the quantitative data (Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, Donovan, Signal, 2018), no statistically significant differences were found between the two countries. Hence, for the purposes of the present article, they are treated as one sample.

Table 1 presents a summary of key demographic variables for the 137 participants whose open-ended responses were analyzed for this article. Women constituted the majority of the sample, reflecting research on domestic violence more broadly. Trans or nonbinary people constituted a significant minority of the sample.

The ethical challenges of inviting participants into an online survey of this kind include not only inviting participants to revisit memories of previous violent familial and/or intimate relationships with the potential negative impacts this might have for them but also that participants might currently be in an ongoing violent relationship. Our approach to address these concerns was to be very clear at the beginning of the survey about what the content would address so that potential participants could make an informed decision about taking part. Second, we provided a list, relevant to each country, of organizations that provide help for those who have experienced or are experiencing domestic violence, as well as organizations offering help for the abuse of companion animals.

Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire designed by the authors, hosted on SurveyMonkey. The first questions were demographic, including information about current animal companions. Having completed the demographic questions, participants then completed two psychometric scales: the Pet Attitude Scale (PAS; Templer, Salter, Dickey, Baldwin, & Veleber, 1981) and the Liking People Scale (LPS;

Table 1. Demographic Variables.

Variable	Category	N
Country	Australia	73
	United Kingdom	64
Age	Mean	38.40
	Standard deviation	12.48
Gender	Female	83
	Male	26
	Nonbinary	28
Transgender	Yes	28
	No	109
Sexuality	Lesbian	42
	Gay	21
	Bisexual	30
	Heterosexual	3
	Pansexual	24
	Asexual	3
	Queer	14
Ethnicity	White	126
	Other	11
Income	UK£00-£22,999	29
	UK£23,000-50,999	22
	UK£51,000 and above	13
	AUS\$0-37,000	24
	AUS\$37,001-80,000	20
	AUS\$80,001 and above	29
Educational level	High school	18
	Trade certificate	6
	GradCert/Diploma	16
	University degree	97

Note. GradCert = graduate certificate

Filsinger, 1981). Having completed the two scales, participants then chose whether or not to complete 42 questions about their experiences of domestic violence and animal cruelty (see below). After completing (or choosing to skip) the questions on domestic violence and animal cruelty, participants then completed two further scales: the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Details about the scales are not provided here as they are not the focus of the present article. The nonscale questions of the survey included five sections that followed the same format and asked about participant experiences of physical, sexual, emotional, financial, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender)-related identity abuse, as defined in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptions of Each Form of Abuse Provided to Participants.

Emotional	May include being isolated, being insulted, being frightened, being told what or who to see, companion animal locked outside and unable to be fed or given water or shelter, being verbally threatened, being belittled or ignored, or restrictions on food
Physical	May include being slapped, kicked, punched, restrained, bitten, physically threatened, stalked, choked, locked in or out of house or room, and hit with an object
Sexual	May include being touched in a way that caused fear, having sex for the sake of peace, being forced into sexual activity, hurt during sex that was not consensual, threatened with sexual abuse, ridiculed about sexual performance, being forced to watch pornography, and being raped
Financial	May include being made to account for all expenditures, expected to go into debt for another person, your money being controlled, and restrictions on money available to provide care for a companion animal
Identity-related	May include your sexual or gender identity being undermined or questioned, having medications hidden or deliberately confused, being misgendered, prevented from engaging with other LGBT people, and having your sexuality or gender disclosed to other people without consent

Note. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

Table 3. Forms of Abuse Experienced, Victim, and Perpetrator.

Experienced abuse	By partner	108
	By family member	89
Form of abuse	Emotional	134
	Physical	69
	Sexual	48
	Financial	39
	Identity-related	58
Animal experienced abuse	By partner	16
	By family member	12

Note. Categories not mutually exclusive.

Each section asked participants whether they or their animal companions had ever experienced the particular form of abuse and who had perpetrated the abuse. Table 3 provides an outline of responses to these questions. Over half of all experiences of abuse were perpetrated by an intimate partner. The most prevalent form of abuse was emotional abuse. Animal abuse was primarily perpetrated by intimate partners.

Participants were then invited to respond to three open-ended questions: (a) “If you are able, please provide details of your experience of [specific type of] abuse. This might include the impact upon you and/or your companion animal, how you responded, and what has happened with the relationship since”; (b) “If you were/are living with companion animals at the time of the abuse, did you seek help from anyone specifically in relation to your companion animals? If Yes, please describe”; and (c) “If you

were/are living with companion animals at the time of the abuse, did this affect how you responded to the abuse? If yes, please describe.” It is these three questions that are the focus of the analysis presented below.

Procedure and Analytic Approach

The questionnaire opened on January 15, 2016, and closed on August 5, 2016. The majority of participants (64%) completed the questionnaire within the first month. A total of 578 people commenced the questionnaire; however, of these only 503 completed the entire questionnaire. Given that information about the questionnaire was shared widely, it is not possible to provide an estimate of response rates. In total, 137 individuals included further responses to the open-ended questions outlined above, constituting 67% of all individuals who reported at least one form of abuse. The responses from these individuals form the data set for the current article.

The open-ended data were analyzed thematically. In terms of the specific steps involved in a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating codes, (c) identifying themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) refining specifics of the themes, and (f) selecting extracts that best illustrate the themes identified. In terms of the first stage, the authors repeatedly read the entire corpus of data, coding for instances where topics repeated. Having coded all of the data in this way, the first author generated themes which were reviewed and amended by the second and third authors. Representative extracts from each theme were then selected by the first author, and the focus of each theme refined by all authors.

Results

Three major themes were identified from the analysis: (a) animal companions are an important source of emotional strength and support to those experiencing DVA ($n = 45$); (b) contrary to popular constructions of victims as passive and nonagentic, people often demonstrated active care and protection of their animal companions ($n = 49$); and (c) witnessing animal abuse is not only traumatic and can cause additional feelings of guilt but can also be a trigger to leaving abusive relationships ($n = 37$). (Numbers after the themes indicate how many times they appeared in the data. Multiple themes often appeared per individual entry in the survey, so the numbers do not add up to 137.) Three minor themes were also identified: (a) emotional impact on animal companions ($n = 19$), (b) impact on family and friends ($n = 24$), and (c) service implications ($n = 17$). We first present the major themes below with excerpts that are coded with an ID number and with gender and identity descriptors (e.g., queer female) provided by respondents in the questionnaire, and then present a general commentary on the minor themes.

Major Themes

Animal companions as a source of support. Animal companions are often an important source of emotional strength and support to those experiencing domestic violence

(Flynn, 2012). For participants in the survey, the sense of unconditional love they experienced with their animal companion was life-enhancing, conveyed through physical affection and presence:

Having an animal gave me someone in the house that loved me unconditionally. (ID #30, cisgender queer female)

I would go and give the cat a cuddle and let her comfort me by bumping me with her head. She was always able to cheer me up. (ID #89, cisgender gay male)

Calm and trusting, animals offered comfort and respite from violence:

The companion animals were a great source of comfort and their presence helped calm me when I was stressed. (ID #484, trans, nonbinary, lesbian)

The dog was a great comfort to me. I used to walk him, and being together really helped. (ID #320, pansexual trans female)

For many respondents, their relationships with animals were crucial to their own well-being and their capacity to rebuild their lives after experiencing violence, with many describing relationships not simply reflective of “keeping pets,” but where animals were important friends, family members, and confidants—relationships that engendered in them feelings of safety and closeness:

My cat at my parents’ house was always a good friend through hard times and the emotional abuse I received. (ID #89, cisgender gay male)

I became closer to the animals, they seemed to empathise. (ID #86, gay cisgender male)

Strengthened bond with animal part of family (had a very strong bond previously). (ID #184, trans, nonbinary, queer)

Nonjudgmental acceptance and support were highly valued by many participants, specifically with regard to sexuality and/or gender:

My cat doesn’t judge me for my outfit or who I fall in love with. Often when I am mentally and emotionally struggling or very upset my cat will come and find me, sit with me and calm me. (ID #298, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

I confided in my pets, the only ones that never judged me. (ID #339, cisgender bisexual female)

I had a close relationship as a child and young person with the family dog. Perhaps in some ways she alleviated some of the aloneness. (ID #25, trans, nonbinary gender, pansexual)

In many ways our companion animals, rabbit and parrot were the best part of my home life during that period and our shared love of the rabbit in particular did give us some common ground and we were both devastated when she had to be put down. I could not have left home if it meant leaving that rabbit. (ID #29, cisgender gay male)

In front of dogs, cats, and other animals, respondents did not have to pretend, play down, or deny their identities. They also reported that these animals offered a sense of protection, assuaging feelings of loneliness, and even constituted a lifeline when they were feeling suicidal:

Cats love you for who you are, which helps when others try to deny your identity. (ID #38, trans lesbian female)

Made me more protective of myself and my dog has also prevented me from taking my own life as no one else is there to look after my dog. The power he has because I feel he needs me and I am needed is priceless. (ID #50, cisgender female, bisexual)

These stronger feelings, in turn, meant that many respondents were committed to providing active care for their animal companions, even in the face of threats of harm to themselves.

Active care for, and protection of, animals. Contrary to popular constructions of victims as passive and nonagentic, participants often demonstrated their active care and protection of their companion animals. Responsibility for animal companions sometimes meant participants prioritized the safety and well-being of their animal companions over their own, with some finding it easier to stand up to perpetrators for the sake of animals rather than for themselves:

Priority was ensuring safety of pets. (ID #140, cisgender lesbian)

Didn't want the dog to suffer so tried to protect her (ID #209, cisgender female, lesbian)

My animals have always had food . . . it is a priority I always uphold, even at the expense of my own wellbeing. (ID #391, cisgender bisexual female)

I could not stand up for myself but I did insist that he let me go home to feed my animals. (ID #474, cisgender female, lesbian)

Rather than only being cowed by a violent partner or family member's behavior, participants reported not only feeling and being responsible for the well-being of their animal companions but also taking action to deliver on that responsibility. These accounts provide evidence of, albeit necessarily limited, agency on behalf of some of the respondents to this survey. This supports Donovan and Hester's (2014a) argument that "victims" of domestic violence should not be seen as passive, or by implication, "weak."

Participant responses also suggested that animal companions played an important but complicated role when it came to decisions about leaving a violent relationship. In the following excerpt, the respondent indicates that if they had known for certain that their cat had been abused, they would have left earlier:

I just remembered that they tried to influence my relationship with my cat, and dictate my cat's life. I think they also lightly smacked the cat as well, but I wasn't sure, or I'd have kicked them out earlier. (ID #237, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

Practical concerns about where and how the animals might live were at the forefront of some respondents' minds:

I think I put up with more because the animals had such a good stable situation. This contributed to a strong feeling of "home" that was hard to walk away from (ID #391, cisgender lesbian female)

For the following respondent, the care of their companion animals was dealt with so that they could then deal with leaving their abusive relationship:

I rehomed my animal companions with my parents to keep them safe and then went about ending the abusive relationship. (ID #414, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

Nonetheless, there were also fears of violent partners seeking revenge that were responded to by active decisions to stay to secure the safety of their animal companions:

I stayed longer because I knew she would keep my dog if I left. (ID #209, cisgender female, lesbian)

I did not flee as I had responsibility to my animal. (ID #276, transgender male, pansexual)

Some respondents, however, were not able or willing to respond physically to their abuser, which makes particular sense if there were more than one abuser:

(The animal abuse) made me angry and resentful towards these people, but I was too scared to challenge them. (ID #339, cisgender female, bisexual)

Despite this, some respondents evidenced their agency in trying to protect their animals by deflecting their partners' violence onto themselves. Others noted the risks of further violence posed to their animals through contact with abusers. As a result, questions were raised about how the love of animals might (paradoxically) enable victims to endure more violence:

I felt responsible for protecting the cats even if it meant enraging my partner further. (ID #383, cisgender female, lesbian)

I had a dog at the time and she stayed at my home whilst I went between my own home and the home of my abusive partner. I would not take my dog to her home as I would not have put my dog at risk of abuse. My dog was a great source of comfort to me. I did sometimes deliberately deflect my partner's anger towards her own animals or her children onto myself (by deliberately goading her) in order to protect them. (ID #296, cisgender female, lesbian)

Others spoke more generally about the ways they tried to take action to mitigate the violence occurring in the relationship, especially with regard to their animal companions:

I tried to minimise what was happening so that pet did not suffer. (ID #209, cisgender female, lesbian)

The following respondent, who above explained they had “rehomed” their companion animals with their parents before focusing on leaving their abusive relationship, talked about it being “easier” to look after their animal companion than themselves:

It was easier to act to keep animal companions safe than myself at that point. (ID # 414, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

Some respondents tried to pacify aggressors by appealing to concerns expressed about an animal's welfare. For instance, one participant noted,

Sometimes it helped to snap us out of a conflict, or to console one/both of us. (ID #503, trans, nonbinary, bisexual)

Thus, these accounts further evidence the ways in which, contrary to popular constructions of victims as weak, passive, and nonagentic, those victimized can exert agency in their relationships. Managing their violent partner's behaviors with appeals to the welfare of their animal companions, actively protecting their companion animals, and even physically retaliating when an abusive partner had been physically violent to an animal, but most often acting on their feelings of responsibility toward animals, are all evidence of agentic behavior that might obfuscate their self-perception as a victim. This suggests a need to reorient the narrative of victimhood, partly to recognize individual agency and also to acknowledge the ongoing strength it takes living on a day-to-day basis in a violent relationship. Such reorientation in the public story of domestic violence (Donovan & Hester, 2014b) is also important so that those victimized are better able to recognize that formal agencies are available to them in their situation. In keeping with this evidence of respondents' agency in protecting their animal companions, for some this sparked their decision to leave the violent relationship.

Witnessing animal abuse is traumatic but can lead to the end of abusive relationships. Witnessing animal abuse can trigger the realization of the degree of violence within the relationship, which can then lead to a different kind of agency: action toward ending the relationship, as is evident in the following quotes.

The impact on my dog was one of the final triggers for me leaving. (ID #102 cisgender female, bisexual)

I left him the moment the abuse spilt over from me to the dog. (ID #483, cisgender female, bisexual)

Trigger to seek help was seeing animals harmed. (ID #414, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

Was worried about the dog. Abused directed towards dog still features in my flashbacks. (ID #69, cisgender nonbinary, asexual, queer)

For some, negative behaviors committed against animals spelled the end of any hope that the relationship (whether intimate or familial) might change for the better, thus signaling a need to leave:

Although I wasn't sure of the smack I witnessed, it hardened my heart against the person. (ID #237, trans, nonbinary, pansexual)

It made me hate my uncle more. (ID #412, cisgender female, bisexual)

Sometimes clarity came in the heat of the moment, over the struggle of the care of an animal:

On one occasion my partner did use my dog to try to lure me back after a particularly severe beating from which I managed to escape. She followed me into the street, holding onto my dog, and ensured I saw her with my dog. I could not leave my dog with her as I was afraid of what she would do to my dog and so I returned. Thankfully, my dog managed to wriggle free of her grasp and ran to me whilst I was still at a safe distance and I escaped again with my dog. (ID #296, cisgender female, lesbian)

Minor Themes

In addition to the major themes reported above, minor themes regarding the emotional impact on animals and the impact on family members and friends were apparent in the data, both of which warrant further research. Almost all extant research on animal abuse has focused on the impact of physical abuse on animal companions. As such, it was notable that several of the participants mentioned that their animals suffered emotional trauma as a result of the abuse directed at them or their human caretaker or because of the changes in living arrangements that responses to the abuse led to. Given research has clearly shown that animals suffer emotional trauma and that regular changes in routine and/or living spaces as well as separation from their human kin can trigger such trauma (McMillan, Duffy, Zawistowski, & Serpell, 2014), this minor theme suggests the need for closer attention to this issue in the context of the relationships of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities.

The data also suggest that family and friends are the most likely to be called on for help when individuals are leaving violent relationships and have nowhere else for

animal companions to go (Donovan & Hester, 2014a). Additionally, and perhaps more worryingly, the data indicate that these family and friends can sometimes become caught up in the abuse as a result of their attempts to help the animals, at the request of the abused human. Again, this is an area in need of further research.

Finally, the data indicate that there is an increased need for services that can help with animals, in part because many humans will remain in abusive situations if they cannot guarantee their animal's safety. Beyond this, however, the data also suggest that services may need to be specifically tailored to people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. In their responses, some of our participants noted they did not know where to go for help when an animal was involved:

It was very frightening and I struggled to know how seriously to take the threats made against my animal, and was unsure where to go for help. (ID #174, heterosexual trans male)

More concerning, some respondents noted that when they did go to certain places for help, that help was not forthcoming, particularly for the animals involved:

Sought help from police (did not respond well about my dog). Also got intervention order through local courts (court assistance was amazing) (ID #284, gay cisgender male)

Conclusion

While drawing on a subsample of a larger study, the findings presented in this article offer a unique snapshot of the experiences of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities with regard to violence perpetrated against both themselves and animal companions, by both intimate partners and family members. Given what we know of the link between human-directed and animal-directed violence, as outlined earlier in this article, and given that people of diverse genders and/or sexualities are no more likely to be exempt from this link than are cisgender and/or heterosexual people, the findings reported in this article thus make an important contribution to understanding the impact of animal abuse upon people of diverse genders and/or sexualities and their animal companions.

Importantly, the abuse of animals provoked for some participants an agentic sense of responsibility to manage violent partners or family members to protect, and sometimes actively defend, their animal companions. Such agentic responses challenge constructions of victims as passive, weak, and nonagentic. However, previous research (Donovan & Hester, 2014a) has suggested that it might be the case that such agency can be confusing, such that victims of violence do not recognize themselves in popular constructions of victimhood, which in addition to being cisgenderist and heteronormative, are also feminized, weak, and passive. This might act as a barrier to their help-seeking; therefore, help providers must change the narratives about those victimized to better represent the ways in which some people do act agentially, for example, with regard to animals.

An associated finding from the data is that taking on the role of being responsible for animal companions can also lead to increased risk of further violence. Mirroring the literature we reviewed earlier in the article that has primarily focused on cisgender

heterosexual women, the abuse of animals often kept the participants in our sample in the violent relationship, for fear of what might happen to the animal if they left. Importantly, however, witnessing the abuse of an animal could be a trigger to leave a violent relationship, again echoing previous research discussed earlier that has primarily focused on cisgender heterosexual women.

Echoing the extant, largely cisgender and heterosexual focused literature on “the link,” participants often mentioned that animals were a source of support in times of crisis; however, there were also specific, identity-related, aspects of the care that animal companions provide that appear to be unique to people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. That is, in populations where identity abuse is a significant, but often overlooked, predictor of poor mental health and reduced social support, animals offer a counter to this in the form of an affirming view of an individual’s sexuality and/or gender. This highlights the need for more research within this space, given that existing research on cisgender heterosexual women’s experience of the link between human- and animal-directed violence does not entirely capture the experiences of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities.

We must note, of course, that the findings presented here are limited by the fact that they are derived from responses to open-ended questions in a largely quantitative survey. Nonetheless, the depth and uniqueness of many of the comments suggest that the findings represent an important window into experiences of the link between human- and animal-directed violence among people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. That said, the sample was primarily White and relatively well educated, and thus further research is needed to explore the diversity of experiences within the communities of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities. This may be reflective of the use of social media as our main recruitment tool. Studies show that social media can be cost-effective and allow quick access to a wide range of individuals (Harris, Loxton, Wigginton, & Lucke, 2015a), and the existing research suggests that such methods lead to representative samples (Fenner et al., 2012). However, it is unclear whether people respond differently online to how they might through other mediums (Harris et al., 2015a, 2015b), and this is particularly concerning for research into sensitive topics such as domestic violence.

In conclusion, and as can be seen by comparing the second two major themes with the final minor theme, while there are many similarities with regard to the link between human- and animal-directed violence in the context of cisgender heterosexual relationships and in the context of the relationships of people of diverse genders and/or sexualities, there are nonetheless differences. That it would appear, at least for some of our sample, that these differences were not understood and engaged with by service providers suggests a key area where further work is needed. It is one thing for services to accept people of diverse genders and/or sexualities and in some contexts to provide (often separate) housing for their animal companions, but it is another thing entirely for such services to have an informed understanding of what animal companions mean to people of diverse genders and/or sexualities in the context of violent relationships. As such, this article has made an initial step toward contributing to the knowledge base from which service providers can draw when supporting people of diverse genders and/or sexualities and their animal companions who have experienced violence.

Acknowledgments

The first, second, and fifth authors would like to acknowledge that they live and work on the lands of the Kaurna people and to acknowledge their sovereignty as First Nations people. The fourth author would like to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Darumbal people, upon whose land she lives and works.

Authors' Note

Nik Taylor is now affiliated with University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Animal Medicines Australia. (2016). *Pet ownership in Australia*. Barton, Australia: Newgate Communications.
- Arluke, A., Levin, J., Luke, C., & Ascione, F. (1999). The relationship of animal abuse to violence and other forms of antisocial behavior. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 14*, 963-975.
- Ascione, F., Weber, C., Thompson, T., Heath, J., Maruyama, M., & Hayashi, K. (2007). Battered pets and domestic violence: Animal abuse reported by women experiencing intimate violence and by nonabused women. *Violence Against Women, 13*, 354-373.
- Ascione, F., Weber, C., & Wood, D. (1997). The abuse of animals and domestic violence: A national survey of shelters for women who are battered. *Society & Animals, 5*, 205-218.
- Barnes, R., & Donovan, C. (2016). Developing interventions for abusive partners in lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender relationships. In S. Hilder & V. Bettison (Eds.), *Domestic violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives on protection, prevention and intervention* (pp. 297-320). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barrett, B., & Sheridan, D. (2017). Partner violence in transgender communities: What helping professionals need to know. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 13*, 137-162.
- Becker, F., & French, L. (2004). Making the links: Child abuse, animal cruelty and domestic violence. *Child Abuse Review, 13*, 399-414.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.
- Brown, T., & Herman, J. (2015). *Intimate partner violence and sexual abuse among LGBT people*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute.
- Collins, E., Cody, A., McDonald, S., Nicotera, N., Ascione, F., & Herbert, J. (2018). A template analysis of intimate partner violence survivors' experiences of animal maltreatment: Implications for safety planning and intervention. *Violence Against Women, 24*, 452-476.
- Dadds, M., Turner, C., & McAloon, J. (2002). Developmental links between cruelty to animals and human violence. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology, 35*, 363-382.

- DeGue, S., & DiLillo, D. (2009). Is animal cruelty a “red flag” for family violence? Investigating co-occurring violence toward children, partners, and pets. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24, 1036-1056.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. (1998). *Rethinking violence against women*. London, England: Sage.
- Donovan, C., & Hester, M. (2014a). *Domestic violence and sexuality: What's love got to do with it?* Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Donovan, C., & Hester, M. (2014b). Questionnaire survey of domestic abuse in same sex relationships: Part of the final report to the Economic and Social Research Council for a project. In *Comparing love and violence in heterosexual and same sex relationships* (Award No. RES-000-23-0650). Swindon, ESRC Research Report.
- Edwards, K. M., Sylaska, K. M., & Neal, A. M. (2015). Intimate partner violence among sexual minority populations: A critical review of the literature and agenda for future research. *Psychology of Violence*, 5, 112-121.
- Faver, C., & Strand, E. (2003). To leave or to stay? Battered women's concern for vulnerable pets. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 18, 1367-1377.
- Fenner, Y., Garland, S., Moore, E., Jayasinghe, J., Fletcher, A., Tabrizi, S., et al. (2012). Web-based recruiting for health research using a social networking site: An exploratory study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 14(1), e20.
- Filsinger, E. (1981). A measure of interpersonal orientation: The liking people scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 45, 295-300.
- Fitzgerald, A. (2007). “They gave me a reason to live”: The protective effects of companion animals on the suicidality of abused women. *Humanity & Society*, 31, 355-378.
- Flynn, C. (2012). *Understanding animal abuse: A sociological analysis*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Grant, J., Mottet, L., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J., & Keisling, M. (2011). *Injustice at every turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.
- Grierson, J., Pitts, M., & Koelmeyer, R. (2013). *HIV Futures Seven: The health and wellbeing of HIV positive people in Australia*. Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society.
- Guadalupe-Diaz, X. (2013). An exploration of differences in the help-seeking of LGBQ victims of violence by race, economic class and gender. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, 9, 15-33.
- Guadalupe-Diaz, X., & Koontz Anthony, A. (2017). Discrediting identity work: Understandings of intimate partner violence by transgender survivors. *Deviant Behavior*, 38, 1-16.
- Gullone, E. (2014). An evaluative review of theories related to animal cruelty. *Journal of Animal Ethics*, 4, 37-57.
- Harris, M., Loxton, D., Wigginton, B., & Lucke, J. (2015a). Harris et al. respond to “social media recruitment.” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 181, 750-751.
- Harris, M., Loxton, D., Wigginton, B., & Lucke, J. (2015b). Recruiting online: Lessons from a longitudinal survey of contraception and pregnancy intentions of young Australian women. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 181, 737-746.
- Head, S., & Milton, M. (2014). Filling the silence: Exploring the bisexual experience of intimate partner abuse. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 14, 277-299.
- Island, D., & Letellier, P. (1991). *Men who beat the men who love them: Battered gay men and domestic violence*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Johnson, M. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

- Kessler, R., Andrews, G., Colpe, L., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D., Normand, S. L., et al. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959-976.
- Liang, B., Goodman, L., Tummala-Narra, P., & Weintraub, S. (2005). A theoretical framework for understanding help-seeking processes among survivors of intimate partner violence. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 36, 71-84.
- Lobel, K. (Ed.). (1986). *Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- McMillan, F., Duffy, D., Zawistowski, S., & Serpell, J. (2014). Behavioural and psychological characteristics of canine victims of abuse. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 18, 92-111.
- Newberry, M. (2017). Pets in danger: Exploring the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 34, 273-281.
- Onyskiw, J. (2007). The link between family violence and cruelty to family pets. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 7(3), 7-30.
- Pet Food Manufacturer's Association (PFMA). (2016). Pet Population 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-population-2016>
- Putney, J. (2014). Older lesbian adults' psychological well-being: The significance of pets. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 26, 1-17.
- Renzetti, C. (1992). *Violent betrayal: Partner abuse in lesbian relationships*. London, England: Sage.
- Riggs, D., Taylor, N., Fraser, H., Donovan, C., Signal, T. (2018). The Link Between Domestic Violence and Abuse and Animal Cruelty in the Intimate Relationships of People of Diverse Genders and/or Sexualities: A Binational Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Advance online publication. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518771681>
- Ristock, J. (2002). *No more secrets: Violence in lesbian relationships*. London, England: Routledge.
- Roch, A., Morton, J., & Ritchie, G. (2010). *Out of sight, out of mind? Transgender people's experience of domestic abuse*. Edinburgh: LGBT Youth Scotland, Scottish Trans Alliance, Equality Network.
- Rogers, M. (2017). Challenging cisgenderism through trans people's narratives of domestic violence and abuse. *Sexualities*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1363460716681475
- Simmons, C., & Lehmann, P. (2007). Exploring the link between pet abuse and controlling behaviors in violent relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22, 1211-1222.
- Templer, D., Salter, C., Dickey, S., Baldwin, R., & Veleber, D. (1981). The construction of a pet attitude scale. *Psychological Record*, 31, 343-348.
- Upadhy, V. (2014). The abuse of animals as a method of domestic violence: The need for criminalization. *Emory Law Journal*, 63, 1163-1209.
- Volant, A., Johnson, J., Gullone, E., & Coleman, G. (2008). The relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse: An Australian study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23, 1277-1295.
- Walters, G. (2013). Testing the specificity postulate of the violence graduation hypothesis: Meta-analyses of the animal cruelty-offending relationship. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18, 797-802.
- Walters, M. L., Chen, J., & Breiding, M. J. (2013). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 findings on victimization by sexual orientation*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- Wax, D., & Haddox, V. G. (1974). Enuresis, fire setting, and animal cruelty: A useful danger signal in predicting vulnerability of adolescent males to assaultive behavior. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 4, 151-156.
- Wuerch, M., Giesbrecht, C., Price, J., Knutson, T., & Wach, F. (2017). Examining the relationship between intimate partner violence and concern for animal care and safekeeping. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0886260517700618
- Yllo, K., & Bograd, M. (1990). *Feminist perspectives on wife abuse*. Newberry Park, CA: Sage.
- Zimet, G., Dahlem, N., Zimet, S., & Farley, G. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52, 30-41.

Author Biographies

Nik Taylor is an associate professor in Sociology at Flinders University where she teaches about and researches human-animal relations, including links between domestic violence and animal abuse. Her most recent books include (with Lindsay Hamilton) *Ethnography After Humanism* (Palgrave, 2017) and (with Heather Fraser), *Rescuing You, Rescuing Me: Domestic Violence and Companion Animals* (Palgrave, 2018).

Damien W. Riggs is an associate professor in social work at Flinders University and an Australian Research Council Future Fellow. He is the author of over 200 publications in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, family studies, and mental health, including (with Clemence Due) *A Critical Approach to Surrogacy: Reproductive Desires and Demands* (Routledge, 2018).

Catherine Donovan is professor in social relations and leads research in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Sunderland. She has spent nearly 30 years researching the intimate and family lives of lesbians, gay men, and, more recently, bisexual and trans people. Currently, her work focuses on domestic violence and abuse in the relationships of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and/or T (transgender) people, and hate crime. Building on her recent collaborative university-wide research on student safety, she is also an institutional lead for a bystander intervention program.

Tania Signal received her PhD (Psychology) from Waikato University in New Zealand and in 2003 moved to Australia, taking up a position at CQUniversity. Since then, she has developed a comprehensive research program investigating a range of maladaptive behaviors, including domestic violence, child abuse, and deliberate harm to animals, and the possible links between these. She is a member of the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence, the Appleton Institute, and a Charter Scholar Member of the Animals & Society Institute (USA).

Heather Fraser (associate professor) is a social work academic who teaches courses such as human rights-based social work practice and understanding addictions. Her theoretical orientations are feminist, intersectional, antioppressive, and narrative, and over the past 6 years she has been developing an interest in human-animal studies. Her recent books include *Neoliberalization, Universities and the Public Intellectual: Species, Gender and Class and the Production of Knowledge* (2016, with Nik Taylor, Palgrave, London) and *Understanding Violence and Abuse, An Anti-Oppressive Practice Perspective* (2017, with Kate Seymour, Fernwood, Winnipeg).