

# Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse: The Differences in Perceptions of Animal Companions Between Survivors and Non-experiencers of Abuse

Serena Girard

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rochelle Stevenson, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Thompson Rivers University

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the differences in perceptions of animal companions between survivors and non-experiencers of domestic violence (DV). Survivors in the shelter group (SG) were interviewed via focus group method. Non-experiencers in the community group (CG) were interviewed via semi-structured interview method. Participants were adult women with previous and/or current animal companions. Transcripts were analyzed in terms of thematic analysis. Three key themes, with various subthemes emerged: *Theme 1: Relationship between guardian and animal companion*; *Theme 2: Animal companion perceived as important by guardian*; and *Theme 3: Relationship between animal companions and abuse*. Overall, many women viewed their animal companions as important and as members of the family. The SG women were separated from their animal companions, viewed money as a barrier to having animals, and viewed animals as a protective support system. The CG women were generally not separated from the animal companions, did not view money as a barrier to having animals, and perceived their animals as a form of responsibility rather than support. As existing literature (e.g., Meyer, 2012; Barrett et al., 2018; Stevenson, Fitzgerald & Barrett, 2018) indicates that many women delay leaving abusive relationships due to concern for their animal companions, the goal of this research is to ensure that both human and nonhuman survivors of violence are safe in situations of DV. Given that SG women saw their animals as sources of protection and support, domestic violence shelters should allow animal companions. To mitigate potential issues surrounding having animals in shelters (e.g., fears and allergies), there should be specific rules in place. Overall, housing should aim to allow companion animals and not discriminate against those with animals (*speciesism*). The goal is to see a future where, regardless of species, all survivors of domestic violence are allowed in a safe space.

## Introduction

### Aim:

Determine differences in perceptions of animal companions between survivors and non-experiencers of DV.

### Goals:

1. Ensure more survivors, both human and nonhuman, are safe.
2. Argue for more pet-safe programs in domestic violence shelters.
3. Argue for programs to help survivors acquire an emotional-support animal.

### Definitions:

*Domestic Violence*: Any form of abuse, whether physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, spiritual or financial, which is committed by one romantic partner toward another romantic partner in the context of an intimate relationship. May or may not involve children (based on Adams, 1994; Faver and Strand, 2007; Johnson & Dawson, 2011).

*Animal Abuse*: Any harmful action toward an animal that is unacceptable, unnecessary, and intentional. Can be physical, sexual, neglectful, emotional, and/or threatening in nature (based on Allen, Gallagher & Jones, 2006; Agnew, 1998; Barret et al., 2018; Flynn, 2012).

*Participant*: Any adult woman (18+) who either previously had and/or currently has 1+ animal companions. The CG required women to reside in Kamloops, BC, and the SG required women to reside in an undisclosed domestic violence shelter.

## Literature Review

### Facts (Statistics Canada, 2016):

- 93,247 human victims/survivors
- 73,400 were women

### Predictors of Human Domestic Violence:

- Cycle of abuse (Based on DeKeseredy, 2011; Flynn, 2012)
- Gender (Flynn, 2012)
- Education level (Ascione et al., 2007 ; Volant et al., 2018)
- Income level (DeKeseredy, 2011; Johnson & Dawson, 2011)
- Relationship status (DeKeseredy, 2011; Johnson & Dawson, 2011)

### Predictors of Animal Abuse (Agnew, 1998):

- Ignorance
- Certain traits
- Type of animal

### The Co-occurrence:

- Existing literature demonstrates co-occurrence (numerous studies)
- Abused women are 11x more likely to experience animal abuse and 4x more likely to experience threats to animal companions (Ascione et al., 2007)
- Many women delay leaving abusive relationships out of concern for their animal companions (Meyer, 2012; Barrett et al., 2018; Stevenson, Fitzgerald & Barrett, 2018)

### Speculations on why this association occurs:

- Personhood-parallel (based on Adams, 1994; Flynn, 2012)
- Somatophobia (Adams, 1994)
- Psychological control (Adams, 1994; Allen, Gallagher & Jones, 2006; Faver and Strand, 2007; Newberry, 2017; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007; Wuerch et al., 2017)

## Methodology

### Overview:

- Qualitative mixed method
  - Semi-structured interviews (CG)
  - Focus group (SG)
- TRU-REB Clearance
- Ethical considerations

### Data Analysis Process:

- Transcription of recordings
- Thematic analysis
  - Preliminary framework
  - Subsequent analyses
  - Theme and coding guide
- Iterative process

### Participants:

Age	Children	Previous Animals	Current Animals	Amount	Way Acquired	Reason for Adopting
29	Yes	Yes	S <sup>b</sup>	1	Shelter	Support
39	Yes	Yes	S	1 <sup>c</sup>	Pet store	Support
41	Yes	Yes	S	1	Street	Family
69	Yes	Yes	S	1 <sup>c</sup>	Pet store	Support

<sup>a</sup>Animal companion demographics are about the animals that were discussed in the focus group. In this case, it is those who are situationally with their guardian.

<sup>b</sup>S = Situational. This means that animals are not currently with their guardian.

<sup>c</sup>These two participants are mother and daughter, and were discussing the same animal.

Age	Children	Previous Animals	Current Animals	Amount	Way Acquired	Reason for Adopting
23	No	Yes	Yes	2	Shelter/Ad	Rescuing
23	No	Yes	Yes	5	Shelter/Ad/Research	Support/Research
50	No	Yes	Yes	2	Ad/Friend	Support
56	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	Ad	Support/Family
60	Yes	Yes	Yes	2	Breeder/Shelter	Support/Family

<sup>a</sup>Animal companion demographics are about the animals that were discussed in the interviews. In this case, it is the animals currently with their guardian.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Relationship between guardian and animal companion

- Subthemes:
  - Type of relationship
    - Family: Responsibility (CG) vs. Support (SG)
  - Living situation
    - Together (CG) vs. Separated (SG)
  - Monetary considerations
    - Barrier (SG) vs. Not (CG)

### Theme 2: Animal companion perceived as important by guardian

- Subthemes:
  - Responsibility (Only CG)
  - Support system (SG > CG)
  - Connection (SG = CG)
  - Sapience and Sentience (No difference\*)

### Theme 3: Relationship between animal companions and abuse

- Subthemes:
  - Control (Only CG\*)
  - Barrier to leaving (SG < CG)
  - Protector (SG > CG)

## Discussion

- Allowing animal companions in shelters
- Bringing therapy animals into shelters
- Emotional-support animal programs for survivors
- Changes in the shelter intake process
- Changes in the legal process
  - Police, courtrooms, laws

## Conclusion

- Many view their animal companions as important
- Many view them as family members
- Animal companions separated from SG but not CG
- Money as a barrier for SG but not CG
- Animal companions as support system and protectors for SG
- Need for changes in policies and programs to better help women and animals
- Need for more research on DV and animal abuse