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## A Template Analysis of Intimate Partner Violence Survivors' Experiences of Animal Maltreatment: Implications for Safety Planning and Intervention

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### Abstract

This study explores the intersection of intimate partner violence (IPV) and animal cruelty in an ethnically diverse sample of 103 pet-owning IPV survivors recruited from community-based domestic violence programs. Template analysis revealed five themes: (a) Animal Maltreatment by Partner as a Tactic of Coercive Power and Control, (b) Animal Maltreatment by Partner as Discipline or Punishment of Pet, (c) Animal Maltreatment by Children, (d) Emotional and Psychological Impact of Animal Maltreatment Exposure, and (e) Pets as an Obstacle to Effective Safety Planning. Results demonstrate the potential impact of animal maltreatment exposure on women and child IPV survivors' health and safety.

### Keywords

domestic violence; animal abuse; coercive control

### Introduction

The use of violence and coercion against an intimate partner is a violation of human rights and a serious global health issue (Guruge, 2012); moreover, intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most prevalent types of violence against women. Recent nationally representative research documents that 24% of women in the United States have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). Among studies of women's IPV victimization, physical abuse experiences are most commonly examined. However, a large body of research documents that IPV

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perpetrators use numerous tactics of domination and/or coercion to entrap and harm their partners (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008; Pence & Paymar, 1986; Stark, 2007). In particular, perpetrators engage more frequently in psychological or emotional forms of coercion than direct physical or sexual violence (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000). One well-documented tactic of coercive emotional and psychological abuse against female intimate partners is cruelty and violence toward household pets, which can function as a method of intimidation, control, and retaliation (Ascione et al., 2007; Onyskiw, 2007; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). Despite empirical evidence of the strong attachments that IPV survivors and their children experience with family pets (Faver & Cavazos, 2007; McDonald et al., 2015), few qualitative studies have been intentionally designed to explore how women with children experience and respond to maltreatment of companion animals in the context of relationships characterized by IPV. The aim of the current qualitative study was to advance the nascent research in this area and acquire insights to assist service providers in safety planning and intervention efforts with pet-owning IPV survivors. Our approach differs from and improves on earlier work by utilizing a rigorous qualitative analytic process (i.e., template analysis) and a large, ethnically diverse sample of 103 pet-owning women with school-age children recruited from residential and non-residential community-based domestic violence (DV) services.

## **Pets in the Context of Family Violence**

Irrespective of the presence or absence of IPV in a household, pet ownership is ubiquitous, with representative national research indicating that 65% of U.S. homes include companion animals (American Pet Products Association, 2016). Given the pervasiveness of pets in households and the epidemic rates of IPV (Breiding et al., 2014), researchers have sought to establish the prevalence of intersecting animal maltreatment and IPV. Several studies conducted in the United States, Ireland, and Australia (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Nielsen, 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Flynn, 2000b; Gallagher, Allen, & Jones, 2008; Volant et al., 2008) have found that between 25% (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007) and 71% (Ascione, 1998) of pet-owning women receiving services for IPV-victimization report having experienced their partner threaten and/or harm a companion animal. Thus, the rate of threats against and harm of companion animals by intimate partners has varied across studies, and these discrepancies are likely due to inconsistencies in sampling and surveying techniques as well as cross-cultural variations in the role of companion animals in family systems (Faver & Cavazos, 2007).

Scholars have theorized that animal abuse by IPV perpetrators is a mechanism of coercion to influence an intimate partner, a reactive disciplinary response to animal behavior, and/or a co-occurring form of family violence (DeGue, 2011; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber, & Miles, 2013). Although research in this area is limited, such hypotheses have been supported empirically through quantitative and qualitative findings. Pertaining to animal maltreatment as a mechanism of coercive control, Ascione et al. (2007) found that the women recruited from DV shelters had experienced their partner harm a pet at higher rates (54%) than a control group of women recruited from the community who were not abused by their intimate partners (5%). In a similar study, Volant and colleagues (2008) compared rates of

animal maltreatment among women who had experienced IPV and women who had not experienced IPV victimization. They reported that 52.9% of women who had experienced IPV reported animal maltreatment by a partner while none of the participants in the comparison group reported animal maltreatment by an intimate partner (Volant et al., 2008). Research suggests that IPV perpetrators may be more likely to use animal maltreatment as a coercive tactic when their partner has a valued bond with the animal and/or an emotional attachment to the animal that can be exploited. For example, Faver and Cavazos (2007) surveyed women receiving IPV shelter services and found that 88% of participants who reported animal maltreatment by their partner identified the maltreated pet as a “very important” source of emotional support; in contrast, only 51% of the women in the sample who did *not* report maltreatment of pets by their abusive partner indicated their pet was an important source of support. Notably, studies in this area suggest that perpetrators who engage in animal abuse are more likely to execute other severe IPV behaviors such as frequent sexual assault, emotional abuse, stalking (Ascione et al., 2007; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007), and physical injury (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005).

Data on adult and child IPV survivors also support that animal maltreatment emerges in the context of violent households as a form of animal discipline. For example, in a study of women accessing DV services, Carlisle-Frank et al. (2004) reported that 75% of IPV perpetrators who abused pets also engaged in harsh physical punishment of the animal. In addition, a recent qualitative study of school-age children recruited from community-based IPV services reported that 24% of children in the sample described exposure to maltreatment of companion animals that was perpetrated with the goal of disciplining or punishing pets for unwanted behaviors; most often, children indicated that their mother’s abusive partner was the perpetrator of this type of animal maltreatment (McDonald et al., 2015). Interestingly, there is a scarcity of research examining this manifestation of animal maltreatment, and no studies to date have specifically explored how women make meaning of harsh physical punishment of companion animals in the context of their intimate relationships and/or how emotional responses to this manifestation of animal-directed violence may influence IPV survivors’ psychological health.

It is estimated that among U.S. households where companion animals are present, 63.2% consider pets to be members of the family (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2012); therefore, it is reasonable to argue that abuse to companion animals, whether it emerges as a coercive control tactic against survivors and/or a discipline/punishment tactic against animals, can be viewed as a distinct manifestation of family violence that may complicate experiences of IPV and safety planning (McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2016). To this end, a small body of qualitative research has provided evidence that various aspects of animal maltreatment (e.g., coercive tactic to influence partner, co-occurring form of family violence, reactive physical punishment of animal) often intersect and overlap within IPV-affected households, resulting in significant negative implications for survivors’ well-being (e.g., Flynn, 2000b; Hardesty et al., 2013; Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2015). For example, Flynn (2000b) conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 women residing in a U.S. DV shelter. The author reported the following themes across participants: companion animals are seen as family members by IPV survivors, companion animals were subject to a range of abusive behavior

by IPV perpetrators, women delay leaving their abusive relationship due to concerns about animals, and women miss and worry about animals left behind after entering shelter. Similarly, Hardesty et al. (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with 19 women residing in a U.S. DV shelter and reported that IPV perpetrators' use of pets as a control tactic was an important factor that influenced women's safety planning.

The inability of survivors to bring their pets to residential shelter services may exacerbate risks and negative consequences associated with IPV and obfuscate survivors' decision making. A recent national survey of DV shelters reported that only 6% of responding organizations allowed IPV survivors to bring their pets into shelter (Krienert, Walsh, Matthews, & McConkey, 2012). As a result, the majority of pet-owning survivors face the choice of having to relinquish animals or leave pets with abusive partners when entering residential DV services (Faver & Strand, 2007). Across studies, it is estimated that between 18% (Ascione, 1998) and 48% (Carlisle-Frank et al., 2004) of pet-owning women have delayed entry into a DV shelter due to animal-related concerns.

Taken as a whole, research in this area demonstrates that many survivors have strong bonds with companion animals that are exploited by IPV perpetrators, maltreatment of pets may have deleterious impacts on women's psychological well-being, and concerns for pets may operate as obstacles in survivors' safety planning efforts. However, research has not rigorously explored how women with children experience maltreatment of animals in the context of relationships characterized by IPV and/or how related concerns for pets impact parenting, women's safety planning, and trauma recovery. Research suggests that children living in homes where animal maltreatment is present are more likely to perpetrate animal cruelty and model abusers' violent conduct against animals (Petersen & Farrington, 2007; Tallichet & Hensley, 2004). This may serve as an additional way that women experience animal maltreatment in the context of their relationship and function as an added stressor that complicates survivors' psychological health and further compromises parenting (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). In addition, while IPV survivors with children are less likely than survivors without children to delay shelter entry because of their concerns for a maltreated pet (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000b), their safety planning may be further complicated after entering shelter if a child is separated from a companion animal to whom he or she is attached (McDonald et al., 2015). To promote IPV services that are adequately equipped to address the needs of pet-owning survivors and promote holistic trauma-informed and trauma-specific care, additional research is needed to explore the role of animal maltreatment in family systems where IPV is present.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

Qualitative studies are an important component of research on the nexus of IPV and animal maltreatment and have the potential to illuminate the lived experiences of IPV survivors as they navigate their own safety and that of their children and companion animals. To our knowledge, only three studies (i.e., Flynn, 2000b; Hardesty et al., 2013; Tiplady et al., 2015) to date have used a qualitative methodological approach to explore the nexus of IPV and animal maltreatment; notably, only two of these studies reported on their specific methodological orientation and qualitative analysis procedures (i.e., Hardesty et al., 2013;

Tiplady et al., 2015). Extending prevalence studies and small-scale qualitative research in this area, the current study explores how women with children experience animal abuse in the context of relationships characterized by IPV as well as how concerns for animals impact survivors' safety planning. Specifically, our study was guided by the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do women with children experience threats to and harm of companion animals in relationships characterized by IPV?

**Research Question 2:** In what ways does concern for companion animals impact decisions to stay with or leave a partner among IPV-surviving women with children?

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

Qualitative data analyzed in this article were collected as part of a mixed-method phenomenological research study designed to assess women and children's experiences of IPV and concomitant animal abuse. The overarching study used a concurrent model of data collection to guide descriptive inquiry (Giorgi, 2009; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Women accessing residential or non-residential DV services were recruited from 22 DV agencies in a western U.S. state. In accordance with institutional review board-approved protocol, specific agency staff were trained to recruit participants, facilitate the consent/assent process, and administer semi-structured surveys. Women who were over the age of 21 years, had at least one child between the ages of 7 and 12 years, and had a family pet in the last 12 months were eligible to participate in the study. Participants who had more than one child between the ages of 7 and 12 years selected one child to participate in the study and provided demographic, violence exposure, and behavioral information specific to that child.

All surveys were administered in a private space at the DV agency where the participant received services to allow for confidentiality. In consideration of the fact that women in our study were coping with traumatic events, study procedures were designed to maximize privacy and minimize risks and additional stress. Therefore, audio and video data were not collected to enhance confidentiality and reduce the potential burden on survey administrators and DV agencies. To promote choice, comfort, and privacy, participants had the option of writing their responses on a printed form of the survey or having the survey administrator verbally administer the measure and record their responses. In the latter case, survey administrators were instructed to record the exact words of the participants by writing verbatim on the printed form. Participant responses were typically succinct and none of the survey administrators reported difficulty recording the exact words and phrases of the participants. Survey materials were available in English and Spanish. Twenty percent of surveys were completed or verbally administered in Spanish. A professional translator provided English translations of the qualitative data from surveys completed in Spanish. Participants were compensated US\$65 for their participation.

The data analyzed in this article reflect a portion of the overall survey schedule for the larger study. Specifically, participants' qualitative responses to the 28-item Pet Treatment Survey

(PTS; Ascione, 2011) were used in the current study. The PTS is a measure that was designed purposefully for our study and expands upon the Battered Partner Shelter Survey—Pet Maltreatment Assessment (BPSS; Ascione & Weber, 1996). Specifically, the PTS was designed to assess experiences of maltreatment and care of companion animals in the context of IPV-affected households as reported by women accessing residential or non-residential DV services. The measure includes close-ended and open-ended questions pertaining to the following areas: past pet ownership history (three questions; for example, “How many pets have you had in the past 5 years?”); past veterinary care of pets (three questions; for example, “Do your pets have most of their vaccinations?”); negative and positive treatment of animals in the household (nine questions; for example, “Has your partner helped care for your pets?”); responses to animal maltreatment (eight questions; “How did you feel after the pet was hurt or killed?”); the impact of concern for animals on women’s decisions to leave or stay with a partner (one question; “Does concern over your pet’s welfare affect your decision making about leaving your partner?”); child exposure to animal maltreatment (two questions; for example, “Have any of your other children ever seen or heard pets hurt or killed in the home?”); and changes in their partner’s use of violence (two questions; for example, “Have you noticed any change in your partner’s willingness to threaten or hurt a pet?”).

The current study focused specifically on participants’ responses to the following three open-ended questions on the PTS: (1) Has your partner ever *threatened* to hurt or kill one of your pets? (2) Has your partner ever *actually hurt or killed* a family pet? and (3) Did concern over your pet’s welfare keep you from coming to this shelter sooner than now (for women accessing residential programs)? *or* Does concern over your pet’s welfare affect your decision making about staying with or leaving your partner (for women in non-residential services)? When items reflecting threats and/or acts of violence against animals were endorsed, the survey (or interviewer, when verbally administered) invited the participant to provide additional information with the following statement: “Please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as possible.” Qualitative responses to the other 10 open-ended items on the PTS were also examined in the current study given that responses to questions at other points in the survey provided important contextual information needed to gain a holistic understanding of participants’ experiences as they pertained to our research questions.

### Sample Description<sup>1</sup>

A total of 103 women (35.4% of the sample from the larger study) indicated on the PTS that their partner had (a) threatened to harm or kill their pet and/or (b) actually hurt or killed their pet, and provided qualitative data on their experiences of threats and/or harm to their pets by an intimate partner. Data from this subset of women were analyzed for the current study. Participants in the qualitative sample represented a range of racial/ethnic identities (53.4%, White; 33%, Hispanic/Latina; 8.7%, more than one race; 1.9%, American Indian or Alaska Native; 1%, African American or Black and Asian) and ranged in age from 21–56 years ( $M = 36.62$ ,  $SD = 7.54$ ). The majority of the participants (67.1%) reported an annual household income less than US\$30,000 (28.2% reported <US\$10K; 38.9%, US\$10K-US\$29K; 21.4%,

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<sup>1</sup>Maternal and child data were ascertained from a demographic survey completed by the mother.

US\$30K-US\$49K; and 8.8%, > US\$50K) and more than half (58.3%) indicated they had earned a high school degree or had attended some college (9.7% sixth grade or less; 14.5% some high school; 35% graduated from high school; 23.3% attended some college; 13.6% completed bachelor's degree; 2.9% completed master's degree). Women in the sample reported experiencing IPV for an average of 9.94 years ( $SD = 7.44$ ). On average, participants had 2.5 children: 52% of household children were boys and 48% were girls. The majority of women (63%) reported that at least one of her children had seen or heard animals hurt or killed in the home.

## Analysis

ATLAS.ti (Version 7.5.10) was used to conduct template analysis (King, 1998, 2012), an approach commonly used in social science research to analyze large qualitative data sets while honoring the voices of research participants. This method of organizing and analyzing qualitative data is compatible with phenomenologically oriented research designs centered on descriptive inquiry (Brooks & King, 2012). Template analysis allows the researcher to pursue open coding guided by a set of foci centered on the research question(s) or to compare observed data with a theoretically predicted template of a priori codes (King, 2012).

### Qualitative Analytic Steps

Following an initial immersion into the data, the first two authors developed a template of a priori codes guided by the open-ended PTS questions, empirical literature on the intersection of IPV and animal abuse, and our research questions. The coding template was then refined through a multi-stage process. In each stage, two coders independently applied the template to a randomly selected set of 10 transcripts; then, the analysis team conducted a review of the coding results through a peer-debriefing process (Padgett, 2008). During peer-debriefing, additional codes were identified from discoveries in the data that had not yet been captured by the coding template. In addition, inconsistencies in code application were addressed through refinement of code definitions with reference to established literature. Modifications to the coding template were made based on findings from peer-debriefing. In total, the coding template was cycled through this process four times before team consensus was reached on the template. The first two authors independently applied the final coding template (44 codes grouped into five code families) to the entire data set (103 transcripts).

After the full data set had been coded, the team reviewed the data for mismatched coding and made adjustments using the peer-debriefing process. In addition, 10 transcripts were selected at random and an interrater reliability analysis was performed using the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT; Lu & Shulman, 2008). The CAT tool enables users to upload coded ATLAS.ti documents and compare reliability between raters; Krippendorff's Alpha (KALPHA) was selected because it is robust in correcting for chance during the coding process involving two or more coders (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The analysis resulted in a KALPHA coefficient of .90.

Themes pertaining to the research questions were identified in the coded data set through analysis of patterns found between codes and among coded segments as well as through

code use frequencies. Each theme was identified and verified through team consensus. In total, five themes emerged from this process.

## Results

### Descriptive Information About Exposure to Animal Maltreatment

Among the 103 participants completing the PTS, 75% of participants experienced their partner threatening a companion animal; 66% experienced their partner harming a companion animal; 16% experienced an animal having been neglected; and 11% reported an animal having been killed (not including hunting). Of note, 41% of participants reported that their partner had used or threatened to use an object other than a firearm to hurt or kill an animal. Only two participants indicated any accidental incidents of animal harm by a partner.

### Research Question 1

Our first research question pertained to how women with children experience threats to and harm of companion animals in households where IPV occurs. Four themes emerged related to the context of exposure.

**Theme 1: Animal Maltreatment by Partner as a Tactic of Coercive Power and Control**—When reporting incidents in which their partner had made threats against and/or harmed an animal, many participants ( $n = 21$ ; 20.4%) described<sup>2</sup> how the incident was precipitated by their partner's desire to quell or retaliate against their behaviors.

Just last week he was upset because I went to the store without him. He said he was going to burn the bird's wings because I had disobeyed him. (Participant 22)

Right before Christmas I had called my brother in Mexico to wish them happy holidays when he [partner] walked in the door and heard me. He got so upset he started pushing me and punching the wall. He said since one of the most important things to me was my dog [that] he would burn it by tying it up to the grill and turning it on in the back yard so that I learned my lesson to not ever call my brother again. (Participant 8)

Cuando no le hago caso o no le gusta la comida que preparo, agarra al gato y lo avienta contra la pared o lo patalea. Para hacerme enojar, dice que es mi castigo. / When I ignore him [partner] or he doesn't like the food I cook, he grabs the cat and throws it against the wall or kicks it. To make me angry, he says that it's my punishment. (Participant 28)

As exemplified above, many participants noted that their partner's use of animal maltreatment as a coercive tactic was rooted in a reactive emotional response to displeasure with the participant's actions. In some cases, participants described their partner's use of animal maltreatment as strictly instrumental in nature and as a tactic that was used to coerce their behavioral compliance. When elaborating on such events, many participants provided

<sup>2</sup>Identifying information such as names of pets and family members has been replaced. Clarifying information is provided in parentheses and brackets.

information that suggested their partner exhibited marked ongoing or episodic callousness toward the victim and the companion animal.

One time, he [partner] threatened to burn the dog if I did not give him oral sex. He said he was going to tie up the dog to the grill and roast it. (Participant 27)

The first time I left my partner, he was the one caring for my dog. If I didn't tell him where I was, he threatened to snap her neck or shoot her. (Participant 100)

On one occasion, because I would not give him the grocery receipt, he went to grab the bird and was plucking feathers, one by one, until I gave him the receipt. (Participant 30)

Participants also described their partner's acts and threats of animal maltreatment to coerce compliance with their emotional demands. As demonstrated in the following quotes, several participants recounted that their partner expressed jealousy regarding their relationship with a companion animal in conjunction with threats against and/or harm to a pet:

He constantly said "you care about those pets more than me. [Partner said] I might as well drown or choke them to death," and he also threatened to kick the pets, too. (Participant 14)

Hace 8 meses, yo estaba en mi casa y el llevo y yo tenia el perro en mis brazos y el se molesto diciendo que si el perro me daba lo que el no me daba y agarro el perro del pelo y lo avento al suelo / 8 months ago, I was at home and was holding the dog in my arms when he came and got angry, saying that the dog was giving me what he was not giving me, and grabbed the dog by the hair and threw him on the floor. (Participant 24)

Collectively, partners' use of coercive tactics involving animals often created an environment which restricted participants' ability to provide their desired level of caregiving for pets, and led some families to relinquish animals.

He said he spanked the dog but accidentally too hard. But, I think he kicked him [dog] because I came home and his [dog's] leg was broken. Then he [partner] wouldn't let me take him to the vet and said he would kill him if I did. I ended up taking (the dog to the shelter and pretending I found him. I later had to go back and adopt him. He [partner] would grab the cats hard and shake them around. One time he used an exacto knife to cut a mat out of the cat's fur and he cut his [cat's] skin open. (Participant 88)

### **Theme 2: Animal Maltreatment by Partner to Discipline or Punish Pet—**

Participants ( $n = 41$ ; 39.8%) also discussed animal maltreatment by partners that was aimed to punish a pet for behaviors their partner found undesirable. The types of behaviors for which animals were punished ranged extensively and included typical animal behavior (e.g., meowing for food) as well as destructive, aggressive, and anxiety- or fear-related behaviors (e.g., hiding).

A kitten wouldn't come out from under the couch and he [partner] drug it out and threw it across the room. It required medical attention.... I came home one day and

(cat's) nose was bleeding and there was blood on the wall. My gut feeling is that he hurt her on purpose. He would pick her up by the tail and force her to cuddle with him. (Participant 65)

The Lab (dog) chewed a shoe of his and he grabbed the dog by the collar outside and punched her in the head so that her head hit the side of the house and kicked her until she puked. (Participant 57)

Interestingly, some participants represented in this theme noted that their partner's use of physical punishment of the animal occurred when pets behaved aggressively toward family members, toward objects, or toward the perpetrator himself. For example,

He was a big dog and didn't always follow instruction. So if he didn't follow a command, [my] partner would kick the dog, and hit him with things. Sometimes the dog would attack us, so he (partner) would defend himself. (Participant 1)

The Dog chewed up his shoe. He said he was going to hang her in the front yard. He punched a few of the dogs in the face when they snapped at the kids. (Participant 77)

In some cases, punishment of an animal was directly related to the animal's response to incidents of IPV. For example, the following quotes demonstrate incidents when the partner physically maltreated an animal to punish the animal for attempting to protect the participant during a violent incident:

When the dog was a puppy he would hit him with a shoe to discipline him. Sometimes he used a broom. Sometimes the dog would bite my partner when my partner attacked me and then he would turn on the dog. (Participant 85)

He would kick or slap the dog. I would step in and stop him. About 4 months ago he would hurt the dog when the dog would attack him for hitting me. (Participant 71)

Across and within Themes 1–2, many participants also reported experiencing multiple incidents of animal treatment that were carried out in diverse ways (e.g., abuse, killing, neglect, threats with firearms).

The dog had multiple cracked teeth from him [partner] punching her in the face. He would stand on the dog's neck and stomp her ribs. He would pick her up with her excess skin and swing her over his head and slam her back on the ground.... He would lock cats in the kennel and shake it. The dog had a litter and he broke one of the puppies' paws by throwing it. He would rub the dog's snout in her pee until her nose was raw. He would make the dog eat her own fecal matter if she went [to the bathroom] in the house. He also had two gerbils that turned cannibalistic because of neglect and, after leaving a carcass in the cage for three months, he drowned the other and its babies. (Participant 105)

**Theme 3: Animal Maltreatment by Children**—Concurrent to experiencing their abusive relationship, nearly a quarter ( $n = 23$ ; 23%) of participants in the sample also reported observing children in the household engage in maltreatment of pets.

She's done it herself [child participant]. She has hit and thrown and squeezed the pets herself. It's almost like she's trying to cuddle with them. Then she squeezes them harder when they try to get away. That's what I thought at first but then she hit them too. (Participant 18)

She [child] was sitting on the dog and yelling at him, and about to choke him. 4 years ago. 5 years old. (Participant 68)

Among participants represented in this theme, some reported attempting to intervene in incidents of child-perpetrated animal maltreatment and/or making efforts to redirect child behaviors and encourage children to treat pets humanely. In addition to self-reporting on how they intervened in cases of animal maltreatment by children, some participants described other children in the household intervening in such incidents. For example, one woman stated,

The 12-year-old has been rough with the cat, too. She'll throw the cat down. I told her you can't treat a cat or a person that way. She throws the cat down for no reason. It's unnecessarily rough. It happens way too much for it to just be the cat (scratching, biting). The 12-year-old will say "we're just playing. The cat doesn't mind." The youngest one doesn't hurt the cat. She'll tell the others not to hurt the cat. (Participant 18)

Furthermore, among those who recounted a child engaging in animal maltreatment, some participants' responses attempted to contextualize their child's treatment of animals.

I feel that my child restrains our dog—hugs him too tight even if the dog doesn't want it. I feel like my child needs to control something, so he controls the dog, but does not mean to hurt him. (Participant 93)

Notably, several participants represented in this theme stated that they perceived their child to be modeling their partner's maltreatment of animals and/or harming animals because the abusive caregiver encouraged such behavior. Similar to IPV perpetrators' animal maltreatment behaviors, children also engaged in a diverse range of behaviors.

The 5-year-old will lose his temper and hit the dog—the same dog his father hits. (Participant 10)

At our house my other child [has] stabbed, thrown, and squeezed my dog because he witnessed it from his father. (Participant 98)

He (my son) hurt the cat because his dad told him to. (Participant 70)

**Theme 4: Animal Maltreatment Exposure's Emotional and Psychological Impact**—Participants frequently reported that the experience of animal maltreatment in the context of IPV had a deleterious impact on their emotional and psychological well-being ( $n = 21$ ; 20.4%). When pets were threatened or harmed by the abusive partner, participants in our study often described complex negative emotional responses involving concurrent feelings of anger, sadness, and/or anxiety. Participant 84 stated, "Estaba enojada y preocupada / I was angry and worried." In some cases, participants described the negative emotional impact on the family as a whole.

The family would cry a lot when he'd [partner] put the animal outside or he'd abuse the dog. (Participant 59)

Also, the emotional impact of animal maltreatment on participants, coupled with empathy for the pet, led some participants to take action to change or prevent their partner's interactions with their pet(s).

I stopped letting him [partner] walk her because he was too mean to her. I stopped letting [him] walk her. He chokes her. That could be why she cowers around him. He says, "She's just a dog!" I can't stand to see somebody hurt her. I think almost seeing him do that to her reminds me of how he treated me. (Participant 11)

## Research Question 2

Our second research question pertained to ways in which participants' concerns about companion animals impacted their decision to stay with or leave a partner. One prominent theme emerged in relation to this question.

**Theme 5: Pets as an Obstacle to Effective Safety Planning**—Concern for pets prevented some participants ( $n = 39$ ; 38%) from being able to engage in effective safety planning due to their partner's use of animal maltreatment as a tactic of coercive power and control (Theme 1). In the context of coercive control, many participants feared or were certain that their partner would harm or kill a pet to retaliate for their suspected and/or carried out actions to leave the relationship. For example, a participant in non-residential services gave the following response when asked whether concern over her pet's welfare affected her decision about leaving her partner:

He is very controlling over me. So if he even suspects of me leaving or staying somewhere else he will start to torture the cat and dog until he is convinced that I am not leaving him. I can't leave or he will kill them. (Participant 47)

Participants also reported on how their safety planning involving pets delayed their ability to access DV shelter services and/or increased the duration of their time residing with the abusive partner. These descriptions often centered on participants' lack of access to safe pet-sheltering services (e.g., temporary pet-fostering programs) and the inability to access shelters or housing that would accept pets. The following quotes demonstrate how concern for pets' welfare resulted in women, children, and/or pets remaining in abusive environments longer than desired and/or being homeless due to their inability to access services that shelter pets.

I wasn't going to leave unless I could take the pets with me. So I had to find a place for all of us. I'd be worried he would take violence out on the dog. (Participant 87)

When I left, I took the dog with me because I was afraid of what he would do to her to get back at me. I had to make many arrangements to make sure the dog had somewhere safe to stay. (Participant 9)

I lived in my car until I found someone to take in my dog, then I went to the [domestic violence] shelter. (Participant 74)

[I] knew I could not leave the pet with him. Twice I had to take a pet to the pet shelter or Craigslist. (Participant 67)

As illustrated in the above quotes, concerns for pets in the absence of pet-sheltering services resulted in several participants looking to other community or web-based resources to find safe options for pets to alleviate their fears and worries related to potential violence toward and/or neglect of the pet in their absence. Interestingly, one participant described an opportunity to place her pet in a foster home, which then facilitated her access to a DV shelter:

I was hesitant [to go to a DV shelter] until I talked with someone who helped me get my one dog in the shelter for a foster home. (Participant 99)

A few participants also noted that concerns about being able to financially care for pets and/or children on their own challenged their ability to engage in safety planning involving pets. One woman stated,

Everything financial, I was worried I wouldn't be able to take care of my daughter and the dog on my own. (Participant 106)

In addition to financial concerns, when participants described how concern for a pet delayed or prevented leaving the relationship or seeking shelter services, emotional responses to animal maltreatment (Theme 4) and emotional bonds with pets were often evoked. Within this theme, some participants also expressed that safety planning was influenced as a result of their child or children's attachment to pets in the home. For example, one woman noted,

I did not have anywhere to go and when I went into a shelter they did not allow pets so, since my son was crying for the pets, I returned home until I had enough money to rent an apartment. (Participant 86)

As exemplified in this quote, for some mothers, safety planning was complicated by children's attachment to and relationships with pets, as well as their own concerns for the animal.

## Discussion

Our study examined experiences of animal maltreatment among pet-owning IPV survivors who have children, with specific attention to the ways in which concerns for pets impact women's decisions to stay with or leave their partner. Our findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of women's experiences of animal maltreatment in the context of relationships characterized by IPV as well as the impact of pets' welfare and the human-animal bond on IPV survivors' safety planning. Pertaining to our first research question, which centered on how women with children experience animal maltreatment in households where IPV is present, nearly 20% of participants described animal maltreatment actions that were used as a coercive tactic by the IPV perpetrator to punish or control the participant's actions and behaviors (Theme 1). Women also reported experiencing animal maltreatment perpetrated by their partner outside of coercive incidents; in particular, nearly 40% recounted that their partner's threats against or cruelty toward the animal were perpetrated to punish or discipline the pet for undesired behaviors, which emerged as our second theme.

Experiencing animal maltreatment at the hands of children in the household was also a theme among women in the sample (23%), with several women reporting that they perceived their child to be modeling observed animal maltreatment by an abusive partner (Theme 3). Notably, women also reported on the emotional and psychological impact of their complex and distressing exposure to animal maltreatment in the context of IPV, which emerged as Theme 4.

Participants recounted threats or harm to animals as both reactive and instrumental behavior related to jealousy and controlling the basic activities of life, including phone contact with a relative, grocery shopping, and preparation of meals. This theme aligned with Stark's (2007) assertion that an important facet of coercive control involves the regulation of domestic roles and establishment of a generalized environment of disempowerment. Moreover, our findings support Flynn's (2000b) assertion that perpetrators commonly make emotional demands on partners and mistreat animals as expressions of jealousy. Interestingly, our findings also mirror prior studies reporting different pathways to IPV perpetration and underlying self-regulatory processes (e.g., Chase, O'Leary, & Heyman, 2001; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). In particular, some participants described their partner's impulsive and emotionally reactive aggressive behaviors toward animals, which may reflect compromised self-regulatory processes that lead to retaliatory behaviors (Finkel et al. 2009). Others described incidents of callous aggression in which partners engaged in strategic, planned actions and animals served as instruments of aggression to coerce the survivor (Chase et al., 2001). Instrumental and reactive aggression involving animals rarely overlapped in participants' accounts.

Consistent with Ascione et al.'s (2007) quantitative findings, many women in our sample reported that perpetrators who used animal maltreatment as a coercive tactic also used other severe IPV tactics. For example, participants frequently stated that firearms and other weapons were present during animal maltreatment incidents and used against the participant and animal, sometimes in the presence of children. The use of animals as a means to control, punish, and frighten women parallels IPV offenders' documented use of children to control, punish, and intimidate their partners via methods such as showing jealousy regarding the survivor's relationship with their children, threatening to take children away, or harming children (Ahlf-Dunn & Huth-Bocks, 2012). Similar to how IPV involving children has been conceptualized as a distinct type of abuse overlapping with IPV (Ahlf-Dunn & Huth-Bocks, 2012), our findings suggest that IPV involving animals is a distinct yet overlapping form of violence occurring in family systems.

The most prevalent form of animal maltreatment described by women in our sample was harsh physical punishment of pets. Consistent with prior research, across and within participants' descriptions, women reported that IPV perpetrators engaged in a variety of acts of animal cruelty including threats, harm, neglect, and killing as a result of displeasure with typical animal behaviors (e.g., meowing) and/or animal misbehavior (e.g., urinating on carpet). In particular, our findings parallel that of Carlisle-Frank and colleagues' (2004), who found that perpetrators of family violence who also abused pets demonstrated "unrealistic expectations" of animals, resulting in typical animal behaviors (e.g., barking) being met with frequent and aggressive correction by the abusive partner. This finding

highlights a cycle previously described by DeGue (2011), in which harsh punishment of the animal reinforces the pet's aggressive behavior and may contribute to the increased likelihood of other family members using harsh physical punishment and reactive approaches when interacting with animals in the household. DeGue argues that multidirectional violence involving companion animals is cultivated and rewarded through this cycle, and may be one mechanism through which children's perpetration of animal maltreatment (Theme 3) is promoted. Other scholars (e.g., Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006) suggest that mothers in homes where pets are subjected to harsh punishment may also witness the harsh physical punishment of their children. Jarvis, Gordon, and Novaco (2005) reported that maternal exposure to harsh physical punishment of their child(ren) was associated with increased anxiety among IPV survivors. Given the strong bond of survivors with their pets as well as expressed feelings of responsibility for the pet's welfare, we hypothesize that exposure to harsh physical discipline of animals may have a similar impact on survivors' psychological health.

Although prior research has reported on mothers' knowledge of their child(ren)'s animal cruelty (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b; Volant et al., 2008), our study is the first qualitative investigation to support that animal maltreatment by children is another distinct way that parenting IPV survivors experience harm to companion animals. Of particular note is the finding that several mothers perceived their child's maltreatment of pets to be a modeled behavior that the child acted out as a consequence of exposure to their partner's animal maltreatment rather than as perceived callousness or intentional cruelty. This finding supports a social learning model of intergenerational transmission of animal maltreatment behaviors and is consistent with prior quantitative research documenting elevated rates of animal abuse among children living in households where IPV occurs (Ascione, 1998; Currie, 2006; Faver & Strand, 2003; Renner & Slack, 2006). Future research is needed to explore how the intergenerational transmission of self-regulation processes (Boutwell & Beaver, 2010) and callous/unemotional traits (Henry, Pingault, Boivin, Rijdsdijk, & Viding, 2016) may interplay with exposure to parental conflict and animal maltreatment to influence child survivors' maltreatment of pets and future relationship behaviors. Overall, our findings pertaining to this theme suggest that the attributions mothers make regarding their children's maltreatment of animals may have implications for understanding IPV survivors' level of parenting stress, perceived self-efficacy, and quality of the mother-child relationship.

Our finding regarding the emotional impact of witnessing animal maltreatment corresponds with previous research indicating that household members often form close bonds with companion animals, especially when companion animals are thought of as family members (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b). Moreover, this study replicates earlier research reporting that emotional pain and psychological distress are experienced by survivors (Tiplady et al., 2015) and their children (McDonald et al., 2015), who witness or have knowledge of harm to companion animals in IPV-affected households. Our data suggest that when animals were punished for "attacking" offenders who were simultaneously perpetrating acts of physical violence against participants (i.e., "about 4 months ago he would hurt the dog when the dog would attack him for hitting me"), descriptions of emotional distress were common among survivors who felt that their bond with their pet may have contributed to the animal's involvement and subsequent mistreatment (i.e., "I felt sad because the cat was just trying to

protect me”). Thus, this finding parallels results from recent qualitative research on children’s experiences of animal maltreatment (i.e., McDonald et al., 2015) and, like child survivors of IPV, women in our study reported living within a duality of finding support in their bond with a companion animal while also being at increased risk of having that bond exploited by their partner.

Pets as an obstacle to effective safety planning emerged as a theme (Theme 5) across residential and non-residential participants and illuminated our second research question, which examined how survivors’ decision to stay with or leave a partner was impacted by the presence of their pet(s). This finding is consistent with prior research (e.g., Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b; Hardesty et al., 2013) and of particular importance given that all participants were parenting school-age children. Among women exposed to IPV and animal abuse, parenting status has been shown to influence the timing of their shelter entry, with women who do not have children delaying shelter entry more frequently than their parenting peers (Ascione et al., 2007). Nonetheless, our findings provide evidence that attachment to and concern for pets impacted parenting survivors’ safety planning efforts in multiple ways, and often influenced them to stay with or return to an abusive partner. Specifically, concern for pets impacted participants’ ability to stay safe while in a relationship, influenced their planning to leave the abusive relationship, and/or impacted efforts to remain safe after leaving the abusive partner.

Survivors in this study also shared examples of safety planning on behalf of pets while still in a relationship with their abusive partner, including relinquishing pets. Extending prior research in this area, our findings highlight survivors’ use of various community supports and online resources to address safety for their pet in addition to their own safety planning. In addition, our findings suggest that children’s emotional bond to their pets may influence their mother’s ongoing safety planning, especially in situations where children exhibit emotional distress after being separated from their pet following a transition to shelter services. Finally, prior research suggests that IPV survivors’ concerns for animals may persist over time following their initial separation from the partner as IPV perpetrators attempt to use animal maltreatment as a means to retaliate against and punish their partner for leaving the relationship (Roguski, 2012). Although this did not emerge as a theme in our data, the potential ongoing exploitation of the human–animal bond is important to consider given that these acts of post-separation maltreatment of animals may have ongoing negative impacts on IPV survivors’ safety (Roguski, 2012).

### Limitations

As with prior studies (Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Flynn, 2000b; Volant et al., 2008), we utilized a convenience sample recruited from multiple DV service organizations within a single U.S. state. Thus, findings from this study should be interpreted with caution, as the themes that emerged in our data may not speak to the experiences of pet-owning IPV survivors who do not seek community-based services, including those whose pets may function as a more salient obstacle to accessing IPV services. In addition, using maternal reports of prior animal maltreatment experiences, this study relies on retrospective self-reports. Our methodology could have been strengthened by tracking whether participants

completed the PTS verbally or in writing, and by video or audio recording verbally administered surveys to allow participants' emotional expressions and non-verbal communication to be transcribed. Furthermore, a central limitation of our study is the use of the PTS to guide participants' responses. This measure was designed to examine a wide range of areas related to the care and treatment of pets. Thus, there are a number of additional and/or alternative questions (e.g., How does it make you feel when you witness your child harming a pet?) and prompts that could have been integrated into our interview procedures to expand knowledge regarding our central research questions. In particular, asking more precise questions, that evaluated partners' harm and killing of pets separately, may have generated greater knowledge of the motives and antecedents of animal-directed violence in the home.

## Implications for Practice and Research

### Practice

Our findings have important implications for DV advocacy organizations, social workers who serve families experiencing IPV, law enforcement, animal control officers, veterinarians, and other professionals who regularly come into contact with families and their companion animals. DV shelter organizations should continue to build collaborative networks with local animal support services, and develop safe sheltering options for families exposed to IPV and their pets. Specifically, our finding that weapons (i.e., firearms) were frequently used during animal maltreatment, and that women and children's concern for and emotional attachment to companion animals delayed or impacted safety planning decisions, indicates that shelter services should consider the value of developing co-sheltering programs, such as Sheltering Animals and Families Together (SAF-T; Phillips, 2015), which allow families and companion animals to stay together while in shelter. Advocates and counselors can also help survivors address potential feelings of guilt and/or responsibility for maltreatment of the animal in the context of IPV. In addition, continued efforts are needed to increase awareness among mental health professionals, educators, and veterinarians about the linkages between IPV and animal maltreatment so that clients' concerns about animal maltreatment are taken seriously and efforts are made to uncover potential IPV and offer support for clients seeking to protect their animals (McDonald et al., 2015). Finally, given the bonds between adult and child survivors and their pets, intervention efforts should help survivors and children process trauma associated with animal maltreatment, death, or relinquishment, and nurture survivors' bonds with children to promote resilience (Groves, 1999), especially among families with histories of child animal maltreatment behaviors.

### Research

Taken as a whole, our findings point to the need for additional studies to advance measurement of women and children's exposure to, response to, and perpetration of animal maltreatment. Our study, alongside prior work, provides evidence in support of the need for revisions to measures such as the PTS to identify multiple types, motives, and perpetrators of animal maltreatment, as well as behavioral and emotional responses to such events. In addition, our finding that weapons (i.e., firearms) were frequently used during animal maltreatment incidents indicates a need for future research on the usage of weapons in

animal maltreatment, and the potential exacerbating impact of concomitant exposure to weapons on children and women's psychological, behavioral, and physical health.

Unlike maternal exposure to abuse and physical discipline of children (Jarvis et al., 2005), the impact of women's exposure to harsh physical discipline of animals is largely unexplored. However, the human-animal bond can mirror the mother-child bond and, for some IPV survivors, witnessing the abuse of their companion animals may create experiences and outcomes such as anxiety that are similar to the impact of witnessing harm to their child (e.g., see Jarvis et al., 2005). Future studies should explore the compounding effects of survivors' witnessing of maltreatment of their child *and* companion animals, and how such cumulative abuse may have distinct effects on trauma symptoms (Scott-Storey, 2011). In addition, the literature has not yet robustly explored IPV-surviving mothers' awareness of their children's exposure to animal abuse. A valuable contribution of future work would be to explore how mothers' knowledge of their child's exposure to animal maltreatment influences survivors' psychological well-being and parenting self-efficacy. Future research should also consider how animal maltreatment by abusive partners is used to influence *children*, and how such acts function as an additional form of coercion by the IPV perpetrator. Moreover, the psychological impact associated with children's exposure to this form of coercive parenting should be examined, as well as the impact on mothers who witness IPV perpetrators engaging in coercive parenting involving maltreatment of companion animals. To better understand and serve women who survive IPV, future studies should also explore the impact of witnessing children engage in animal cruelty on survivors' psychological well-being and how witnessing such behavior might undermine their confidence as parents or activate a trauma response when their child(ren)'s behaviors mimic those of the perpetrator. In addition, research is needed to understand how children's concern for companion animals may influence mothers' safety planning decisions.

Finally, researchers such as Finkelhor and colleagues (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2013; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015) argue that co-occurring forms of violence are important to consider in the context of understanding the short- and long-term behavioral and psychological health outcomes associated with violence exposure. Many studies (e.g., Edleson, Shin, & Johnson Armendariz, 2008) consider women and children's experiences of animal abuse as one manifestation of IPV in the home. Findings presented in this study demonstrate that exposure to animal maltreatment is, at times, distinct from IPV-related experiences. Moreover, IPV-surviving women and children have important bonds and relationships with their pet(s) that are meaningful and separate from relationships with other members of the household. Due to the salience of the human-animal bond and multiple motives and antecedents pertaining to violent animal-related incidents in households experiencing IPV, we advocate that animal maltreatment exposure be explored as a distinct form of violence exposure so that future research and practice can more holistically prevent, assess, and/or remedy family violence.

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## Biographies

**Elizabeth A. Collins**, MSW, completed this research while working as the Advocacy Director at the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV). She engaged in efforts to support community-based advocacy programs and to improve statewide responses for people who have experienced domestic violence. Before joining CCADV in 2008, she had the privilege of working directly with survivors of domestic abuse in shelter and community settings. She has particular interest in empowerment-based advocacy, trauma-informed services, batterers as parents, and addressing the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment.

**Anna M. Cody** is a social work doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). As a graduate research assistant, she works on research regarding the impacts of intimate partner violence and animal maltreatment on children. Her research interests include working with children and youth to expand and improve family violence prevention programs as well as exploring the impacts of child welfare policy changes on children, families, and social workers.

**Shelby Elaine McDonald**, PhD, is assistant professor in the School of Social Work at VCU. She received her PhD in social work from the University of Denver. Her research and publications focus on ethnocultural variations in women and children's exposure and response to intimate partner violence and human-animal interactions in the context of welfare, health, and socioecological justice. She has a specific interest in the intersection of children's exposure to intimate partner violence and concomitant animal cruelty. Her current research uses advanced person-centered statistical techniques to explore heterogeneity of adjustment among children who experience polyvictimization.

**Nicole Nicotera**, PhD, is associate professor of social work at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work. She applies her expertise in qualitative and mixed methodologies to research topics that include promotion of health and well-being across the life span; the role of risk, protection, and resilience in health; civic engagement and mindfulness practices as pathways to well-being; measuring civic development and engagement; interventions to enhance civic leadership and positive youth development; and issues of unearned privilege and oppression in social work practice, education, and research.

**Frank R. Ascione**, PhD, is an internationally renowned researcher and author who has conducted research related to humane education, children's attitudes toward animals, and child and adolescent animal abuse. His research on animal abuse examines the common roots of violence toward people and animals and is directed at identifying an early indicator of at-risk status in children. He served as the inaugural American Humane Endowed Chair and executive director of the Institute for Human-Animal Connection at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) from September 2009 until June 2012. He is a scholar-in-residence at the GSSW.

**James Herbert Williams**, PhD, is dean and Milton Morris Endowed Chair at the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. He holds his MSW from Smith College,

MPA from the University of Colorado, and PhD in social welfare from the University of Washington. His research and publications focus on human security and economic sustainability, health promotion and disease prevention, health equity, sustainable development, mental health services for African American children in urban schools, violence prevention, and community strategies for positive youth development.

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