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# The No-Kill Controversy: Manifest and Latent Sources of Tension

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# The No-Kill Controversy: Manifest and Latent Sources of Tension

## 5 CHAPTER

*Arnold Arluke*

### Introduction

**T**raditionally, most animal shelter workers have denied that the killing, or euthanasia, of animals in their facilities was cruel, even when euthanized animals were adoptable, young, attractive, and healthy.<sup>1</sup> Workers have sustained a core professional identity of being humane, good-hearted “animal people” who want the very best for their charges, despite—or even because of—their euthanasia of animals. Killing has been taken for granted, regarded as a “necessary evil” having no alternative in their eyes.

One reason shelter workers have been able to maintain this self image is that, until the last decade, little if any organized criticism has been leveled at them. When criticism occurred, it tended to be case-specific, focusing on which animals were euthanized, how it was done, and whether the shelter shared this information with the public. Although a few shelters offered an alternative to the standard paradigm by restricting admission of unadoptable animals and billing themselves as “no-kill” shelters, they did not represent a serious threat to the continuation of “open-admission” policies toward euthanasia.<sup>2</sup>

However, criticism of euthanasia has mounted steadily in frequency and fervor from within certain seg-

ments of the sheltering community. In 1994 the Duffield Family Foundation created the Maddie’s Fund, which sought to revolutionize the status and well-being of companion animals by championing the no-kill movement. No longer possible to ignore or discount as an outrageous idea, this movement has spurred debate at the national level about the proper role of euthanasia in shelter practice. The resulting challenges have strained the ability of conventional shelters and humane organizations to protect workers psychologically from the charge that euthanasia is a form of cruelty. Instead of preventing cruelty, which their mission maintains, these organizations now are seen as causing it. In response, the no-kill movement has been attacked by those who defend the practice of euthanasia and open admission.

Although some argue that everyone in the debate shares a passionate concern for the welfare of animals, a rift over this issue divides the shelter community. Ultimately, the best interests of animals may not be best addressed in a climate of controversy and criticism. To understand and perhaps reduce this controversy, the tensions fueling the no-kill conflict need to be identified and the breadth of the gulf separating its two camps assessed.

### Method

I investigated the shelter community’s response to the no-kill movement in two communities that have taken different approaches to the issue. Though located on opposite coasts of the country, these metropolitan areas are similar in size and wealth. The makeup and nature of their humane organizations, however, are quite dissimilar. One community is home to many independent organizations that individually have received praise or criticism over the years; until recently they have been a widespread group of equals sharing a common media market. Even animal control programs have been large, countywide, and sometimes-progressive players in their own right. In the other community, two key players are so large that they have dwarfed the role and significance of others; the two players have been conservative, lagging somewhat behind the nationwide trends in sheltering. These two communities have dealt very differently with the pet overpopulation issue. In one case the SPCA (society for the prevention of cruelty to animals) has embraced the no-kill concept, while in the other it has not. There are differences in the relationships between the SPCAs and neighboring humane organizations, as well; in the former community

these relationships are uneasy, while in the latter they are cordial.

In each community I conducted participant observation at the SPCA shelter, the city animal control office, and nearby (i.e., within sixty miles) smaller shelters that either competed with or complemented the work of the SPCAs. "Sanctuaries" and rescue groups also were studied. Gatekeepers in these settings introduced me to respondents as a sociologist interested in understanding how people thought and felt about the no-kill issue. I was allowed to observe almost every facet of shelter and sanctuary operation, including, but not limited to, kennel cleaning, intake, adoption work, behavior training, and euthanasia. Ultimately I carried out more than 200 hours of observation and 75 interviews that elicited the interviewees' perspective on the no-kill issue and the animal overpopulation problem. In addition I attended the national meetings of the major no-kill and open-admission organizations, examined press accounts and shelter publications relating to no-kill, and combed several Internet news groups that discussed shelter issues.

Details about each camp's perspective were subject to respondents' biases, distortions, and memory limitations. Information obtained was treated as an accurate reflection of what people thought and felt, whether or not it was objectively true, since the perception of truth motivated and justified people's behavior. From these data I constructed, rather than assessed, the perspectives of both camps toward the no-kill issue. Although this approach follows that of sociologists and social historians, who argue that collective behavior is best understood by examining participants' own understandings in relation to their social context, it may frustrate those who think I should be more critical. However a critical approach would be neither faithful to my ethnographic method nor helpful in creating dialogue and common ground.

I also tried to sample a wide variety of shelter organizations by size, orien-

tation, location, and financial health, but it was impossible, and perhaps unnecessary, to study every nuance and variation. The wide diversity makes it very difficult to characterize the perspectives of these camps. Indeed, at one level, the only thing that makes each camp identifiable as a group is the fact that one supports the role of and need for euthanasia, while the other does not. Even here, though, the why, the how, and the circumstances of euthanasia vary considerably. For example, the players, policies, and realities of animal sheltering in any one community vary in terms of numbers, composition, strength, and orientation of shelter organizations. Arguments and perceptions of individuals on both sides are informed by and respond to the realities of their own communities. In some cases, these local realities lead members of the same camp, who work in different contexts, to make very different comments about the opposition. Knowing this may help readers understand contradictory statements made by respondents on the same side of this controversy.

## Manifest and Latent Tensions

Groups experience tension in two ways. At a manifest or surface level, group members are aware of and speak about superficial differences in attitudes or behaviors thought to cause various problems. These surface tensions are acknowledged publicly at group meetings, written about in professional and popular publications, and debated and mulled over by those who experience them. Since these manifest tensions are thought to be the root cause of problems, solutions are aimed at altering, neutralizing, or eliminating them.

While important to understand and manage, these manifest tensions are symptomatic of deeper, rarely verbalized tensions. These latent tensions are sensed by group members but rarely articulated in a conscious or deliberate manner. The tensions lurk

beneath the surface of everyday communication, perhaps appearing in innuendos that stop short of saying what actually is on the minds and in the hearts of speakers. For those hoping to reconcile tense intergroup relations, it is crucial to identify and correct sources of latent tension. Attempts to reduce conflict often stop short, staying at the manifest level of perceived differences or problems and offering solutions that cannot significantly reduce group tension because issues, images, and implications below the surface remain untouched.

Certainly, the American humane community is no exception to this pattern. Discussions about no-kill have been more cathartic than analytic, allowing people to vent their confusion or anger and identify allies and enemies. These discussions have stayed at the manifest level of intergroup tension, involving issues of dirty work and dishonesty.

## Manifest Tensions

### *Dirty Work*

Some jobs important to the everyday operation of society are avoided by people who choose not to engage in disrespected occupations. This dirty work is seen as distasteful or discrediting because it casts a moral pall over those who do it (Hughes 1964). Most people turn a blind eye to this work, preferring that others do it but viewing those who do so as modern untouchables—members of a caste thought to be symbolically contaminated and best avoided or pitied because they are associated with unpopular, unpleasant, or unclean tasks.

Many of the open-admissionists I interviewed felt that no-kill shelters delegated euthanasia to them. They believed that they were judged to be morally tainted because they killed animals. They sensed they were uncomfortably tolerated, at best, for carrying out such an unpleasant task, and challenged, at worst, for continuing to do it. As one respondent said,

"Why am I now an enemy? It used to be the humane societies versus the pounds, who were the baddies. Now we are the baddies." Another respondent concurred, saying, "It's no fun being the villains with the black hats." As the "baddies," open-admission workers thought that no-kill advocates cast them as wrongdoers who were "looked down upon" (Milani 1997), "discredited" (Bogue 1998b) or "guilty...because they are murderers" (Caras 1997a) "...sadists, or monsters" (Caras 1997b). Moreover some respondents felt that, with the growing popularity of the no-kill concept, the public had joined this critical bandwagon to castigate them as bad people for euthanizing animals. The result was that open admissionists, rather than the public, were blamed.

The casting of open admissionists as "baddies" stemmed from the language used by no-kill advocates. Many open-admissionists argued that the term *no-kill* was itself an "attack" on them, implying a "put-down" of open admissionists as killers (Bogue 1998a). "When they say, 'no-kill,' what they really mean is, 'you-kill,'" claimed one critic (Miller n.d.). Indeed, there was concern that the terminology itself positioned open admissionists as "pro-kill" (Paris 1997), since the term *no-kill* implies its opposite. "Open admission shelters are not 'kill' shelters any more than 'pro-choicers' are 'pro-abortion,'" explained one open-admission advocate. Not surprisingly, some open-admissionists have called for abolishing the "no-kill" label and substituting the term *limited admission*.

Even more provocative was language that accused open-admission shelters of killing animals in ways reminiscent of Nazi cruelties to humans. One charge labeled the open-admission approach the "final solution," a term referring to the Holocaust. Another charge was even more specific: referring to euthanasia by open-admissionists, a no-kill conference panelist described it as the "holocaust of family members [i.e., shelter animals] being put to

death." And a number of shelter directors have been called "butcher," "Hitler," and "concentration-camp runner" (Foster 2000; Gilyard 2001, 6–7). Short of specific references to the Nazi Holocaust, some no-kill advocates suggested genocide-like actions by open-admissionists because they were conducting "mass slaughter of animals" or "legitimized mass slaughter."

Slightly less provocative were charges of criminal-like action toward animals. "To me it's *criminal* if a dog with poor manners or who is a little bit standoff-ish should be euthanized for behavior reasons," noted one no-kill advocate. Sometimes the "criminal" metaphor was created through the use of such penal language as "execute." For example, one no-kill trainer was trying to modify the behavior of a very aggressive dog who bit two staff members, required muzzling for walks, and was kept in the shelter for sixteen months. She said that the dog would have been "executed" had the dog been in an open-admission facility. This terminology suggests that, if open-admission workers euthanized this difficult-to-adopt, potentially dangerous dog, their act would be morally equivalent to putting a criminal to death. While open-admission shelters spoke of "euthanasia rooms" and "euthanasia technicians," no-kill staff claimed that their shelters did not have "*execution* chambers" and maintained that they did not "kill" as did their open-admission peers.

At the core of this provocative imagery was the idea that open admissionists were killers, an idea that reinforced the no-kill distinction between killing and euthanizing. Open admissionists patently rejected this distinction, claiming that they only euthanized. Of course, when working with peers, open-admission workers did speak of killing. Shelter workers sometimes used the term *kill* when speaking with colleagues but were careful to say "euthanize" when speaking to the public. Use of this language was not an implicit acceptance of the no-kill distinction, but

rather a combination of black humor and informal understanding that they were using *kill* as a linguistic shorthand to describe their acts. Other shelter workers deliberately used the term *kill*, at least before the rise of the no-kill movement, as an interesting way to demonstrate their continuing lack of acceptance of euthanasia as a solution. For them it served as a reminder that this was something they did not like to do and wanted to eliminate the need for. Thus, while some objected to the use of this term because they were concerned about it making them look or feel callous, others supported its use, saying that it helped remind them that they were taking lives—a symbolic way of keeping fresh the commitment to attack the source of the problem.

Open admissionists resented the perception of them as killers because they felt it was unfair or hypocritical. In their opinion, by being forced to euthanize many animals, they were made to shoulder all the moral, emotional, and aesthetic heartaches that went with the job. One editorial argued that the harm of no-kill is that

It punishes shelters that are doing their very best but are stuck with the dirty work. It is demoralizing and disheartening for humane workers who would do almost anything to stop that heartbreaking selection process. Humane workers who are brave enough to accept that dirty work deserve better than that. (Caras 1997c, 17)

Instead open admissionists called for what one interviewee described as "...sharing the burden. As long as there is euthanasia to be done, the resentment on the part of us is that we shouldn't be doing it all. Any shelter in the same town should be sharing the burden. That's like saying we are all working on the same issue. We are all going to take the good stuff and the bad stuff."

However, no-kill proponents argued that if anyone was to blame it should be open admissionists. In their opinion blaming no-killers for delegating dirty work sidetracked shelter work-

ers from a more important matter. Open admissionists, they said, needed to see that they were guilty of complicity in killing because they made it “easy” for the public to handle their animals like unwanted consumer goods disposed of without forethought. “They [open-admission shelters] are teaching the public they can throw away their animals at the shelter, and the shelter will euthanize their problem for them, and they aren’t to blame because they took the pet to the shelter.”

No-killers saw charges of dirty work delegation as “garbage talk,” contending that open-admission shelters needed to rethink their mission and identity so they could become no-kill themselves. Open-admission shelters should “get out of the killing business,” as one no-kill worker said, for the sake of those working in such settings. Carrying out euthanasia was thought to be an “endlessly demoralizing activity” that stopped workers from focusing on their “core purpose: bringing an end to the killing of these animals.”<sup>3</sup> Having sympathy for their euthanizing peers, many no-kill employees wanted them to have the opportunity to work in an environment where the killing of animals was rare and, when done, was for apparently extreme veterinary or behavioral problems. “People are drawn to work here because it is less scary,” observed one no-kill worker. The scariness refers to the loss, guilt, and grief experienced if workers kill animals with whom they have established some relationship, especially if these animals were potentially adoptable. Another worker explained, “I don’t have to worry that I am going to bond with an animal and then have to put him down, which is my perception of what happens in kill shelters. So I feel lucky that those are the kinds of emotions I don’t have to deal with.” This thinking suggested that no-kill workers were not ducking responsibility for delegating dirty work or refusing to share the burden. Instead, they wondered why open admissionists continued their traditional approach to euthanasia, given its adverse emotional impact on them.

No-kill proponents pointed out that they too have been discredited or demonized for not killing enough animals as opposed to killing too many. This stigma was felt, according to many no-kill spokespersons, when they were ignored by open-admission leaders. Several speakers at a no-kill conference lamented the lack of support for no-kill at national animal welfare and animal rights conferences, where companion animal issues were “not well represented.” They felt that open-admission authorities spurned their well-intentioned advances for support of no-kill conferences and other activities. One national spokeswoman for the no-kill movement claimed that prominent open-admission leaders and academics even refused to return her telephone calls. This lack of recognition by mainstream humane authorities was seen as hypocritical, given their presumed concern for promoting the welfare of animals. As one speaker at a no-kill conference pointed out, “The most fundamental right of animals is to be allowed to lead their own lives and not be killed, yet this right has not been strongly embraced by open-admission animal welfare and rights groups.” This was seen as a deliberate repudiation of the no-kill perspective.

No-kill advocates also felt ignored, misunderstood, and criticized at the national conferences of open-admission organizations, because euthanasia proponents seemed unwilling to enter into a “dialogue.” As one no-kill advocate put it,

I don’t like being demonized. So many people there were very resentful of us. They know the wonderful things we do here and how wonderful we are. We were expecting people to be, like, “Wow, you are affiliated with that wonderful group,” and instead we were, like, getting slammed, shielding ourselves from the rotten vegetables being thrown at us. That feeling was very pervasive there [at national meeting].

Another no-kill worker felt “dissed” at a national humane meeting, recalling,

I didn’t appreciate sitting in a workshop and having an HSUS employee speaking, saying to me, “It is the responsibility of all of us in the shelter profession to euthanize animals.” That’s a value judgment. They are communicating that no-kill is bad and that we should all be euthanizing animals. She was basically dissing no-kill. I immediately raised my hand to defend [no-kill shelters] but I was not called on.

## ***Dishonesty***

A palpable distrust existed between open-admission and no-kill followers. Members of each camp insisted that they were woefully misunderstood and misrepresented by the opposition, which, in turn, was seen as portraying itself dishonestly to professional colleagues and the general public.

Open admissionists attacked the honesty of no-kill shelters and spokespersons on a number of counts. First, they said, no-kill advocates lied about not killing shelter animals when the term was taken literally. “I believe they are trained to lie and there is deception to the public... that animals are not euthanized,” said one worker. One critic maintained that some no-killers euthanized animals “surreptitiously, behind closed doors,” so supporters would not find out. To many respondents this “deception” was terminological: “What is a shelter’s definition of *no-kill*? At our shelter it is that we do not kill for overcrowding or when a dog’s ‘time runs out,’ but we do euthanize for behavioral and health reasons. Now to me that’s *not* no-kill. It makes that terminology close to a lie. What do the press and the public and donors think it means? Probably they take the words literally—‘We don’t kill dogs, ever’—well, they do!” On the grounds that the term was false if taken literally, some critics proposed new terminology, calling no-kill shelters rarely-kills or *low kills*. Another problem that has less to do with ter-

minology, but still was regarded as a matter of dishonesty, has to do with misrepresentation. Open-admissionists claimed that no-kill shelters misrepresented themselves by shifting responsibility for killing to other shelters; this made the no-kill shelters accomplices to death, argued the open-admissionists, although the shelters distanced themselves from it. One such critic maintained, "... The reality of a 'no-kill' approach to sheltering simply means 'let someone else kill'" (Savesky 1995a, 4).

Second, open-admissionists said no-killers were deceptive in claiming to adopt out all their animals, a tactic some critics called a "smart marketing strategy." This point was underscored by one critic who claimed that "their almost no-kill policy" resulted from only accepting "very adoptable animals," leaving the "burden" of euthanizing turned-away animals to open-admission shelters. It was alleged that no-kill shelters "take in the 'movie star' dogs and cats, the pretty ones they know they can place in new homes, and turn away the rest" (Caras 1997c, 17). The result of such policies, open-admissionists said, was that most animals wound up at open-admission shelters. "They are strays, 'too old,' unsocialized, injured, or diseased. They are considered unadoptable by no-kill shelters so they are brought to us" (Bogue 1998b). One person compared this self-serving policy to a school that always has impressive SAT scores because it accepts only bright students in the first place. No-kill shelters were seen as excessively "picky," rejecting some animals with extremely minor problems that could be used as excuses for turning them away. Expanding on this point, one respondent said, "If an animal has the tiniest patch of flea allergy, dermatitis, which is curable, they say no if they want to. Bad teeth, they say no if they want to. Any animal they can say no to, they are going to say no. They don't take many that need treatment." One respondent said that even "color" could be used as a reason to classify an animal as "unadoptable," if there

were too many similar looking animals together in a shelter, such as tiger-striped kittens. Some critics also charged that no-kill shelters used a "changeable" classification, whereby a placeable animal could be reclassified as unplaceable if the animal was not adopted, enabling the shelter to claim a "huge" percentage of their "placeable" animals were adopted. Some felt that this classification "game" was so capricious it made no-kill "a joke." All of these manipulations, some charged, enabled the "no-kill propagandists" through "deception" to produce statistics apparently documenting low rates for euthanasia and high "save rates."

Third, critics charged that no-kill shelters misrepresented the cause of behavior problems in dogs, not admitting that these difficulties were due to long-term confinement and/or the kind of training they received. For instance, "excuses" were made for the bad behavior of animals, as in the case of a dog showing "guarding behavior" around food whose actions were "explained away" by pointing to the lack of food the dog had experienced. One worker spoke about "the betrayal the public would feel if they were aware that the shelter they trusted has made them the subject of an experiment in placing rehabilitated biting dogs, an experiment with so many failures." Critics maintained that the aggressiveness of shelter dogs was not fully disclosed to adopters. Upset by this problem, a worker described a shelter that was being sued for adopting out a Rottweiler who was known to have killed one dog, only to have him knock down his new owner and kill her pet dog. The same worker also claimed that this shelter concealed from potential adopters that another dog had bitten seven volunteers. In response, she resigned from her organization, noting: "They adopted out any and all dogs, no matter their history and, worst of all, did not tell adopting families if the dog had bitten previously." Another no-kill worker, uncomfortable with her own shelter's policy, gave credence to this

open-admission critique when she reported "incredible feelings of guilt," making it "hard to sleep at night," because she felt "complicity" in adopting out dangerous animals to clients from whom information was hidden about these problems and who were blamed by staff when animals were returned.

Some critics claimed that, if not deliberately dishonest, no-kill shelters misrepresented themselves because they were unrealistic. One open-admissionist wrote, "The concept of the shelter where no animals must die is a fantasy that seems too good to be true" (Caras 1997c, 16). These "fantasies," argued open admissionists, made donors and the general public "feel good." As one worker said: "The truth is that it is impossible. They are encouraging an expectation that is unrealistic." These expectations

... raise false hopes and wishes for pet owners and our communities that animal abandonment is going to be prevented simply because the killing of adoptable animals is going to be prohibited. The complexities of the problem of killing so many animals in our shelters is not simply due to the perception that an unwanted pet is "better off alive on the streets than being killed at the pound." (Cubdrda 1993)

Critics argued that, in addition to raising false hopes, these fantasies led people mistakenly to believe that euthanasia was unnecessary at their local humane society, a strategy that siphoned funds away from open-admission shelters.

No-kill advocates maintained that their aims were distorted, bemoaning the "warfare" and frequent "bashing" by open-admission spokespersons that resulted in "credibility hits" against them. One no-kill staff member spoke of her frustration with people who misconstrued the meaning of no-kill as a preference for animals to be kept alive in unpleasant or unhealthy circumstances. She noted, "I don't know if there is any sane person who would agree that a ware-

house kind of life. . . is better than death. I don't think anybody is arguing that, except for an extremely small subset of people who are not in the mainstream of the no-kill movement." No-kill advocates also disagreed with those who criticized the concept of no-kill because it failed to be literally true, admitting that a few animals, albeit a tiny number when compared to open-admission shelters, were euthanized. Some even refused to label their shelters as no-kill or minimized use of this term because their euthanasia rates were not zero.

For their part no-kill shelters argued that open-admission organizations "kill healthy animals" (Foro 1997, 16) and misrepresent the real meaning of euthanasia. Seeking to undermine the semantic justification for killing so many animals, one no-kill spokesperson wrote: "The term *euthanasia*, as used by these practitioners [open admission and animal control staff] in the destruction of healthy animals, softens the reality and lessens its impact on the public. Sadly, to mislabel killing as euthanasia for controlling animal overpopulation does not allow society to deal with the tragedy or to accept responsibility for making this happen" (17). "True," "authentic," or "dictionary-defined" (17) euthanasia was spoken about to separate "killing" from other instances where extreme, untreatable, chronic suffering mandated euthanizing animals. No-kill advocates also reclaimed the concept of euthanasia by asserting that humane death be done only for the sake of suffering animals rather than for owners who had their own agenda for requesting euthanasia, suggesting that open admissionists wrongly blurred this distinction. Not surprisingly open-admission advocates rejected this distinction, claiming that it was mere "semantics."

No-kill proponents also refuted the charge that they were "picky" to ensure high adoption rates. They claimed to take many animals that were far from the "cream of the crop," as one worker pointed out. "We

get only the worst here; everybody thinks we take only the best dogs here. It's hard for me to find a family dog in our shelter because we are taking the ones no one else takes." In fact, in one no-kill shelter, there was strong internal pressure on intake workers to accept as many dogs as possible from the nearby animal control office, regardless of their bad or "spooky" behavior or poor condition; otherwise the dogs were likely to be euthanized. In one instance, after an intake worker refused an aggressive, six-month-old dog offered to her shelter, several coworkers chided her and called her a murderer. Challenging back, some no-kill shelters felt that their save rates might be even better were it not for having difficult and unadoptable animals dumped on them by animal control organizations. A respondent explained,

We could inflate our save rate even more if we had a bar that resembled anything like another shelter[']s, where they see the hint of a curl of a lip and that animal is euthanized and it never goes to their staff as an adoptable animal, where we would not even flinch at that. So I would say our numbers are possibly even better in so far as we are taking some serious-behavior animals—dogs that bite you, dogs that are aggressive.

## Latent Tensions

Identifying manifest tensions helps to detail the no-kill controversy but does little to diffuse it. Most proposals to allay the conflict come from the open-admission camp, which has called for no-kill advocates to modify their provocative language. However, those concerned about inflammatory speech in the no-kill controversy have tuned into only a small part of the bigger picture that informs this controversy. Provocative language is a symptom and not a cause of the problem; its social and psychological roots are concealed and complex. To explain the persistence and fervor of the strife, it is necessary to analyze

the unexpressed, complicated, and recalcitrant issues that underlie manifest tensions.

## ***Vested Interests***

Much like the abortion debate, the persistence of which stems from the vested interests of pro-life and pro-choice proponents, the no-kill controversy is stubborn and resistant to easy compromise. No-kill and open-admission followers cling to and defend their vested interests, including their collective identities, occupational lifestyles, and world views. These vested interests underlie any debate about the merits of different policies for controlling and managing pet overpopulation or dealing "humanely" with its victims.

Members of each camp in my research had a vested interest in protecting their humane identities. For no-kill followers this identity provided some cachet because it empowered them. They saw themselves as "rediscovering" who they were, as opposed to open-admission workers whom they felt "have forgotten our mission and are lost in the overwhelming job of euthanasia," according to one shelter worker whose organization was switching from open admission to no-kill. In the opinion of no-killer followers, open-admission work was simply not the work of a "'humane' society." Their new identity also was empowering because it had an outlaw quality; this made it an attractive and powerful label for no-kill workers who felt alienated, misunderstood, and excluded from the humane powers that be. Believing that they were disempowered framed their camp's stance as "anti-establishment" relative to open admissionists (Foro, n.d.a). Poorly endowed, small shelters especially were drawn to the identity tag of no-kill because it symbolically represented their perceived powerlessness in an animal community dominated by a few large and powerful national organizations. The charge made by some that the San Francisco SPCA (SF SPCA) had "sold out" to The HSUS (which is viewed as pro

open admission in its orientation) by increasing the number of animals it euthanized from almost none to a few, speaks to the current importance of boundaries in conferring identity in the humane community.

Other features of the no-kill identity that offered some cachet came from its evangelical quality, calling for people to see the "right" way to approach this problem and convert to this "movement," leaving behind their former, ill-conceived approach. Several respondents commented on the "religious fervor" of no-kill followers; one said that there was a "kind of saintliness" about the movement. There even were rare attempts to include elements of Buddhism and vegetarianism as part of the "no-kill philosophy" (Foro, n.d.b).

Perhaps the most cachet came from unintentional piggybacking on the pro-life movement. Large and successful social movements provide an assembly of symbols and ideological trappings—a cultural resource—that other groups can use to fashion their own thinking and model their own actions, or from which they can draw emotional power and symbolic coherency. While there was little evidence that no-killers subscribed to pro-life beliefs, there were many parallels between the ideologies of these two groups that empowered the no-kill movement and emotionally charged the identity of its followers. Just as the pro-life movement campaigns to save the "helpless unborn" who should not be "killed," the no-kill movement questions the moral, as well as the practical, basis for killing unwanted or undesirable shelter animals. The "killing" of shelter animals signaled a moral assault on the fabric of human-animal relationships that was unimaginable to no-killers, much as abortion was to pro-lifers (Ginsburg 1986; Kaufmann 1999). Many no-kill proponents saw the open admissionists' version of euthanasia as murder committed by selfish owners and unimaginative shelter workers willing to accept the status quo, in the same way that pro-life advocates defined abortion as a crime approved

by a legal system which protected murderers and left victims unprotected (Doyle 1982).<sup>4</sup> In the end this cachet was strong enough to make it virtually impossible to stop using some language, including the very term *no-kill*. Its advocates were unlikely to curtail use of this self-moniker because it so powerfully organized their identity.

Open admissionists have discovered little if any cachet in their humane identity, at least compared with no-killers. For the most part, they have refined their former identity in a reactive and defensive manner by digging in their psychological heels and reaffirming their long-standing image as the standard bearers for humane treatment of animals. Ironically their "new" identity has made them appear to be victims facing a more powerful enemy. For example some open admissionists spoke as though they were on the "wrong side of the street" because the "dirty work" of killing was delegated to them. They felt powerless to stop this flow of animals and the undesirable task of euthanizing so many. Some staff in open-admission shelters and animal control offices, especially in cities that had strong and financially stable no-kill programs, lamented having poorer facilities and less public attention. This difference was noted in a major magazine article about animal shelters, which referred to one city's animal control office as a "tenement" and its no-kill operation as a "palace" (Hess 1998).

Open-admissionists also failed to piggyback their identity on a cultural resource that could give it momentum, coherency, and cachet. In contrast, pro-choice advocates linked their cause to the feminist movement's protection of the rights of women. Support from animal rights groups, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), did not provide this cachet. One reason is that no-kill groups also claimed to be protecting the rights of animals by opposing traditional euthanasia policy, making the rights issue somewhat of a wash. It was true that open

admissionists focused on the issue of easing the suffering of animals and providing options to owners who no longer could or wanted to care for their pets. However this symbolism paled in comparison with the no-kill movement's moral concern for what were seen as innocent, helpless, and desirable animals, a stance similar to the pro-life movement's symbolic construction of the fetus (Doyle 1982; Sheeran 1987). In American society anti-death icons trump almost any other image except that of freedom, and this appears true in the present case. Moreover, although some open admissionists wish to develop their own label conveying a new identity rivaling "no kill," this would perpetuate the tension rather than remedy it.

Workers also had vested interests in protecting lifestyles, whether personal or occupational, associated with either the open-admission or no-kill approach. They sought to defend what was familiar to them at work, while questioning others who threatened this routine. For instance, at one level, the open-admission approach to euthanasia was easier for established bureaucracies that had worked this way for years and had developed suitable defenses to cope with it. Mainstream open-admission shelters have had the resources to garner large-scale support for euthanasia as the best way to deal with pet overpopulation, and they have grown comfortable with their established methods of doing so. One respondent claimed,

We are all vulnerable to the possibility that euthanasia just makes my day go a little bit easier. If you suddenly ended euthanasia for reasons of space, you've got a big problem, don't you? You are going to have 20 or 80 percent more population than before. Solve that problem. If there is euthanasia, it does make things a little bit easy, doesn't it, to have your shelter running very smoothly and efficiently?

No-kill workers also developed organizational routines that made their work easier for them. Those most outspoken in their criticism of euthanasia



took the moral high ground by distancing themselves from it while on the job. In their shelters they regarded euthanasia as a clinical, veterinary act performed elsewhere by technicians in animal control agencies, or an infrequent, highly ritualized and emotionally upsetting treatment of a “good friend” done by in-house veterinarians. They provided a language and set of rationalizations to ensure that such rare, in-house killings would be seen as impossible to avoid, without any ambiguity about the wisdom of doing them. These steps made them comfortable and secure while on the job. Like their open-admission counterparts, they came to see their particular organizational way of life as the best one for animals and themselves.

Finally, these accustomed ways of working endured because workers accepted the presumptions that propped up, defended, and explained them. Usually the presumptions were expressed by people as “truths” that were rarely questioned and often thought to be self-evident. It was predictable that the workers could not see the tenuousness of such “truths,” since ideologies make those who profess them shortsighted as to the implications of their beliefs. The beliefs function as “reality” anchors for people and, as such, are clutched tenaciously. Respondents in my research supported these anchors by use of key terms, such as *shelter*, *euthanasia*, *adoptable animal*, and *humane*, whose meanings were ambiguous and therefore modifiable to be consistent with each camp’s truths. The terms became a linguistic code to define a camp’s position relative to other groups.

For example, while both open-admission and no-kill advocates abhorred euthanasia, they had different takes on killing because they had different conceptions of the fundamental problem. Each group defined the problem somewhat differently, making for different solutions. Open-admission shelter workers saw the problem as an *animal* problem—one of managing pet overpopulation. They argued that no-kill approaches did

not solve this problem but merely shifted the responsibility for euthanasia to another shelter or agency. No-kill advocates, however, saw the fundamental problem as a *person* problem—one of changing the nature of shelter work so that workers could have a professional identity uncontaminated by the contradictions posed by conducting frequent euthanasia, especially if it involved animals thought to be adoptable. Evidence of this changing emphasis from animals to people came from the public justifications of shelters that have abandoned their prior open-admission/euthanasia policies for no-kill approaches. When a major SPCA did so, the *New York Times* headline proclaimed: “ASPCA Plans to Give Up Job Killing New York Strays.” The text explained that

Killing stray dogs and cats has obscured its mission—and its image. . . . The society has backed away from killing, which it calls animal control. “Philosophically, it’s a nightmare to kill 30,000 to 40,000 animals a year. . . . That’s not our mission.” . . . Being perceived as an animal killer has. . . saddled it with an image far different from the one it wants—that of an animal care and adoption agency. (Hicks 1993, B14)

These divergent views were bolstered by the isolation of workers from the realities of shelters unlike their own. Most workers in each camp had little if any firsthand experience with the opposing group. As in the abortion controversy, where pro-life participants had little or no direct exposure to abortion (Luker 1984), most workers in no-kill facilities had scant exposure to euthanasia. Not having direct contact can exaggerate the emotional difficulty of doing something, making it seem even more wrenching than it might be in reality, and making it seem even more horrific or ghastly than it seems to those workers who have learned how to rationalize or cope with it. Similarly, many open-admissionists never worked in no-kill settings; this lack of experience certainly made any other

approach seem impractical or even outlandish.

## **Attacking the Problem**

Differing approaches to dealing with animal overpopulation resulted in a second latent tension. No-kill workers “fought the good fight” for each animal who came their way, expending as much time, labor, and money as necessary to ensure that he or she was cared for, loved, and, they hoped, adopted. Workers could feel as though they championed individual animals. As one respondent said, “We dare to think that every individual life does matter. . . that that individual’s life *actually* matters.” This focus on the welfare and fate of individual animals, combined with the knowledge that euthanasia was very unlikely, allowed these workers to indulge their “rescue instinct” and their need to have emotionally deep and complex relationships with shelter animals, even though they knew that many animals would be adopted.

The major force behind fighting the good fight was the unabashed desire of no-killers to rescue or save animals, believing that it almost always was worth trying to find homes for all animals, even if others classified them as unadoptable. As one respondent said,

There are a lot of self-proclaimed experts who will tell you that this or that dog is unadoptable, don’t even bother trying. And we don’t accept that. You can get terrifically good outcomes. . . . It’s a question of when can you and when can’t you. The jury is out on our animals until we have exhausted all reasonable attempts.

No-kill trainers believed they could rehabilitate most problem animals, including those exhibiting aggressiveness. One trainer compared this challenge with working with criminals, concluding that both animals and criminals can be rehabilitated if people try hard enough. “If you’ve gotten people who’ve committed certain levels of crime, can they be rehabilitated? If you give them the right counseling, can you turn them around, or

is it always in them? I would submit that the right kind of effort hasn't been tried."

No-kill workers felt that open-admission shelters turned their backs on animals that were less than "perfect," euthanizing those that could be placed in homes if given behavioral or medical attention, along with time and careful placement. One no-kill worker elaborated on this view, saying,

Where do you draw the line? Does everything have to be pristine and perfect, and you kill everything else? We want to give animals a chance that we think ought to be given a chance. It's kind of like a "quantity versus quality" type of thing. I mean, the Blackies and the Willies out there, they would be killed because they are not perfect, and I see this wonderful pet that would make a great companion for someone and I think they are worth investing the resources into.

This logic meant that no-kill facilities could "save" or "rescue" animals from open-admission shelters, and that those shelters denied the value of rehabilitating animals who could be improved and perhaps adopted.

Saved animals often faced a severely reduced pool of potential adopters, since it took a very special adopter to be the right match for an animal with behavioral or veterinary problems, let alone one that was old or unattractive. Despite this, no-kill workers convinced themselves that perfect adopters existed for virtually all of their charges. Having this view, however, justified keeping animals for a long time as staff searched for suitable adopters. This search could be particularly trying when dogs were highly aggressive and needed muzzling and constant monitoring. When a no-kill worker was asked who would be an appropriate adopter for such a challenging animal, she said a dog trainer would come to the shelter one day and adopt one. However, she acknowledged—without apparent irony—that no such adopter had come to her shelter since she had

arrived there three years earlier.

Fighting the good fight for all animals made euthanizing any of them a difficult and labored decision. One facility had formal guidelines for deciding on all acts of euthanasia (except for extreme emergencies). The guidelines included obtaining signatures of approval from the president, vice president, and initiating department head, and requiring that the animals' names be posted so no staff would be shocked by inadvertently discovering that a "friend" had been euthanized. After completing this paperwork, cats slated to be euthanized were given special foods and treats; soft, comfortable, secure bedding; adequate scratching posts; and visits from the staff. Dogs were given similar bedding; a rawhide bone during the day; a beef bone at night; special food and "extra special goodies"; a cloth toy; and visits from staff members who would give them "quality time" through long walks, outdoor play "with their special buddies," or quiet time. This "spoiling period," an informal practice at many no-kill facilities, involved special consideration for animals after the decision was made to euthanize them. Spoiling periods "were awkward" for the staff because they knew that animals were to be "put down," but the special treatment also made the staff feel better about the euthanasia decision. One worker said,

The last days are so difficult. I find it very hard to look at a dog carrying on its normal life, when I know that soon it will all be over. But I think it helps us to know that our dog's last day or so was really special. It seems to bring peace to the people around the dog who are suffering, knowing that the dog is going to get euthanized.

The individualization of shelter animals meant that no-kill workers were very disturbed when euthanasia took place, even though, or perhaps because, this was a rare event. "It is always such a big deal. I just cannot get used to it," observed one worker. Enormous internal resistance occurred at

one no-kill shelter when a small number of overly aggressive dogs were slated for euthanasia. "We could not fix them. We were at the end of our ability," lamented one worker. Some dogs had become a danger to the staff and were a liability risk. Management held special meetings with different groups of workers and volunteers to deliver this news, calm those upset or in "shock," and reset the organization's "bar" for rehabilitating difficult dogs. During the meetings senior staff placed most of the blame on external forces, saying, "Our hand has been forced by elements in society." Those external forces included what the staff described as unreasonable expectations for the behavior of animals, and society's excessive litigiousness. Trying to ease distraught and confused listeners, senior staff claimed they "did not have choices" and "couldn't" do anything else with these dogs.

Nevertheless senior managers withdrew their initial list as pressure mounted to spare these animals; a few workers and volunteers demanded meetings with shelter officials to protest this list, and rumors circulated about a volunteer protest strike and leaks to the press. Workers feared that conducting euthanasia on this scale would subvert their identities as no-kill advocates. One uneasy worker spoke about the slippery slope created by doing even a small number of euthanasias: "We are in a position now of either becoming like every other shelter and we save only perfect dogs who need nothing or what...?" Considerable, continued pressure by workers resulted in several dogs being taken off the list and sent to sanctuaries.

Despite these efforts a few dogs from the list were euthanized. The most unsettling case involved a dog having a history of aggression, but with whom the animal's "fan club" had bonded intensely. Only this inner circle was permitted to attend Maria's euthanasia; lights were dimmed in the dog's quarters, and the mood was extremely solemn if not despondent. Many workers were tormented; a few

chose not to attend the euthanasia because they were so distressed. One staff member was hospitalized because she was so disturbed by the event, and several others took "sick days" because of their grief. During the hours preceding the euthanasia, as well as the days following it, workers could be seen embracing each other, offering words of comfort, and shedding tears. "People are walking around like zombies," said one sad worker about her peers. A wake held the evening of the euthanasia again excluded those outside the inner circle of mourners; a poem in honor of Maria was available; stories were swapped about the animal along with photographs of her; flowers and wine were there for the occasion. As one worker said, the sentiment was: "We love you guys, you did good work but this one just didn't work." Contrary to shelter policy, one of the workers requested Maria's ashes; a few staff members thought this was going "overboard."

Open-admission workers, in contrast, related to shelter animals less with their hearts and more with their heads. Unquestionably they too wanted the best for animals that came their way, but their approach was colored by what they saw as a more important issue than the need to feel good about their relationships with individual animals—namely, the need to attack the overpopulation problem by increasing the number of adoptions through euthanasia of animals deemed unadoptable. They also used their heads because they felt it was important never to say no to surrenderers of animals; despite their frustration and anger with surrenderers, open admissionists feared what might happen to the animals if they were not left at the shelter. This thinking forestalled deeper emotional relationships with their charges, because all the animals stood some chance of being euthanized and usually were in the shelter for relatively short periods. One worker aptly summarized this type of thinking as follows: "There's a part of me that I don't give to the dogs—not to that dog—because that would inhibit what

I can do for so many others. I always have to come back to looking at numbers. I can't afford to get attached to a new dog. I have to think with my head. I have to keep part of me for the good of the whole. I won't sacrifice a few for the many."

According to open admissionists, relating to shelter animals with one's heart caused ethical and emotional problems. They claimed that no-kill shelters had such a narrow definition of suffering, they often could not "see" it; certain animals might not be euthanized even to end their suffering. Without clearly seeing suffering, workers as well as animals suffered, although the workers' suffering was emotional.

These problems were evident at Maria's euthanasia, according to shelter staff members who sympathized with the open-admission approach. The fact that this euthanasia was for behavioral rather than medical reasons made it especially difficult for workers to say that Maria's "suffering" justified her death. One exception was a staff member who had worked previously at an open-admission shelter. She commented,

Whenever I put an animal down, I always found it to be redeeming because the dog has been in torment—and any dog I have put down has either had an aggression issue or just not been happy, has had a bad life. For me it was the one thing I was able to do for that dog—give it some peace. I was able to end the suffering.

Indeed, a number of workers at this shelter felt that the strong emotional reaction to the death of Maria was "unfair" to some staff members and out of proportion with what should happen after the loss of an un-owned shelter dog with a history of biting. One such dissenter said that, if anything, members of Maria's fan club were "mourning their failure" to rehabilitate this highly aggressive dog. Moreover, his opinion was that, although he thought it might sound "cold," it was a better idea for emotional reasons to have a veterinarian and technician be alone when eutha-

nizing animals. Having

all the people who were involved in his [the dog's] life standing around him, pushing their emotions on the doctor. . . . it could be difficult for the doctor not to cry. That's not fair to do to the doctor or the tech holding the dog. Why should they be forced to have an emotion for an animal that they have no connection to? They are forced to feel sympathy.

These ethical and emotional drawbacks of bonding so closely to shelter animals were worrisome not just to the no-kill workers but also to open-admission proponents who pondered the fate of their no-kill peers.

By comparison, a nearby municipal animal-control office routinely and unceremoniously euthanized animals. While bemoaning euthanasia, workers there felt that it was the right thing to do given the large number of surrendered animals and the limited space and resources available. They, like other open-admission workers, rejected the notion that they were the "baddies" because no-kill workers needed to "rescue" their shelter animals. The implication of using this language was that these animals were salvageable as potential pets and therefore should not be killed. The problem, according to open admissionists, was that if no-kill workers "rescued" with their hearts, they would neglect the "bigger picture," which the former could see. This criticism was expressed even by some no-kill workers who bemoaned turning away so many animals for lack of sufficient resources to deal with them all. To open admissionists, this was a management problem—a combination of poor resource allocation and bad judgment—that allowed workers to be self-indulgent. Such shortsighted policies were seen as beneficial to workers, since they gained emotional gratification at the expense of animal welfare.

The above-mentioned animal-control office, like many open-admission shelters, had no formal protocol calling for signing off on euthanasia decisions or for in-house postings of the events. Nor was there a spoiling peri-

od for animals being euthanized, although the workers here, like their peers in open-admission shelters, maintained that they “spoiled [the animals] as much as possible” for as long as they were in their shelter “. . . not [just for] twenty-four hours.” Spoiling periods per se were thought to be more for the psychological benefit of workers than for the animals and to place a “huge emotional burden” on the staff members doing the spoiling. While workers lamented having to euthanize animals, they handled it quite differently from their no-kill peers. Rather than expressing their emotions about preventing euthanasia or grieving when it occurred, these workers blocked their emotions when it came to euthanasia. As one worker recalled, “I was like a killing machine, a certified euthanasia tech that euthanized 60 to 100 plus animals every single day. Some days that’s all I did—clean and kill. And go home. You put your feelings on the shelf. You just do your job. You have to deal with that sometime down the line.”

### ***Being Humane***

Short of the most extreme manifestations of physical suffering in animals, no-kill and open-admission workers had very different perceptions of what constituted suffering, or at least enough discomfort to justify killing an animal for his or her own sake. Having conflicting ideas about the nature of suffering led to suggestions that members of the opposite camp were being cruel to shelter animals because they caused needless suffering, either for killing them or for keeping them alive. Alternative notions of suffering also allowed both open-admission and no-kill workers to see themselves as humane because they could say that they were acting in the best interests of animals compared to their peers in the other camp.

Some open-admission representatives argued that no-kill workers were cruel to turn their backs on so many needy or less desirable animals, and that open-admission shelters actually

were responsible for “saving” more animals. One open-admission defender wrote in an editorial, “The Door Remains Open,” that “no-kill shelters seldom operate programs to rescue sick and injured animals off the streets,” suggesting that animals in need are turned away (Savesky 1995b, 2), while open-admission shelters “rescue sick and injured animals every day. . . dogs hit by cars, cats tangled in debris, animals injured by other animals, victims of all sorts of accidents.” In addition, no-kill shelters, according to Savesky, “often turn away older animals, those with minor health or behavioral problems, or those that they otherwise classify unadoptable.” Moreover, this author added that “no-kill shelters seldom investigate and prosecute complaints of cruelty and neglect” (2). By contrast, she argues that many such animals have a greater chance of being adopted in open-admission shelters.

People working in open-admission shelters also thought it was cruel to “warehouse” animals past the point where they should be “humanely euthanized.” Some claimed that warehousing was cruel because of the harmful psychological effects of keeping dogs and cats in long-term housing, especially if caged with multiple animals and given minimal stimulation and human contact. But in discussions less-than-ideal caging or animal care often fell short of being labeled as cruel. One animal control worker, for instance, was uncomfortable with the local no-kill shelter’s practice of putting animals into boarding kennels when space ran out in the facility. “Who do they have to love them? They are going from one cage to another just to keep them alive. I don’t know if it is cruel; it just seems. . . neglectful. The reason why it is hard to say it is cruel is that it is not for a bad reason. The intention is ‘Hold on, hold on, you’ll get your chance.’” Another respondent hesitated to use the word *suffer*, but spoke of the unintentional emotional “neglect” of dogs who are confined in cages and have to deal with many different handlers and visitors—all of

which takes a “toll.” One respondent, however, did use the word *suffer*, claiming that some no-kill shelters kept animals so long that they developed “that nervous thing, like dogs spinning, or some of the barking [which] sounds like suffering to me. They are just unhappy and crying.” Similarly, another critic of warehousing pointed out after visiting a no-kill shelter that “it was spotless. . . . They had air conditioning, climbing trees, toys, and good food. But when you walked in, they were all over you. I had cats attached to my legs and arms, on my shoulders and my head. I had scratch marks for a week after that but not from aggression. These cats were starved for human contact. That’s what breaks my heart about these places” (Donald 1991, 4). Some critics suggested that workers compounded the detrimental psychological effects of long-term housing by using inappropriate behavior and training techniques. As evidence, one respondent cited a case of several dogs who were born in a no-kill shelter and stayed there for seven years. All displayed serious behavior problems that were attributed to the methods used in their training.

Open-admission spokespersons also argued that warehousing in no-kill shelters could cause physical harm. This critique was echoed in a popular magazine, which reported the following reaction of a 4-H group leader after taking the group to visit a no-kill shelter: “Dogs limping around with mange and open sores. Others gasping for air or dragging broken legs, struggling to fight off vicious packs in the large communal pen. ‘I might as well have taken them to a horror show!’” (Foster 2000). The reporter who wrote this article referred to the “atrocious conditions” at some no-kill facilities, and the “luckless inmates” who are “condemned” to “filth” and who “suffer” from long-term caging. Indeed, one respondent claimed that the “quality of care of animals is horrific. They [no-kill shelters] need to do it right and have some standard of care.” For example, he pointed to a no-kill facility that

called his shelter in hopes of transferring some of its 110 animals to reduce overcrowding. When the respondent visited the no-kill shelter, he found that the facility was very cold, merely a “semblance” of a building, and that some of the animals were dead. In addition, when the no-kill shelter was told it could transfer some animals, its manager declined because the open-admission director could not rule out their euthanasia.

Most no-kill respondents denied “warehousing.” They felt that they addressed the “quality of life” issue and provided a better life for animals in shelters than some had in adoptive homes. Although one worker admitted that, “from the dogs’ perspective, they are always prisoners,” she felt that their quality of life was “as good if not better than the [homes where] many open admission shelters place their dogs. . . . I know a good many dogs in suburbia who don’t get walked, have minimal veterinary care, don’t get socialized. They don’t get patted much by their owners. They’re in the yard.” Others defended extended stays; one respondent said they were “less than ideal, however it is fortunate that [the animals] get a chance to end up in a wonderful home where they are completely loved and adored.”

Well-funded no-kills described “lavish” surroundings for shelter animals to counter charges of inhumane warehousing—though these surroundings were sometimes belittled by the press or open-admission shelters as excessive, and better than facilities provided for some homeless people. One no-kill “Q and A” included a question asking how it could justify such a “beautiful” and expensive shelter with “luxury suites for animals, replete with toys, TVs, and playrooms,” when “most humans don’t have quarters like these.” The reply, in short, claimed these “amenities” were not excessive but “important for the animals” to reduce their stress and make them “healthier and happier. So the toys and playrooms are not frivolous. They’re just what the doctor ordered.”

Part of their defense also rested on the language used by no-kill advocates to describe physical and mental problems of animals housed for long periods of time in shelters. The advocates fought hard to describe these problems in ways that did not lead quickly to perceptions of hopelessness for the animals. For example, in one such facility, animals with behavior problems who would have been euthanized in open-admission shelters were described as having “issues.” The word “issues” conjures up psychological problems in humans that can be lived with and managed, as opposed to more troubling behavior that is difficult to tolerate and control. In one case a shelter dog had a history of snapping at children, and was spoken about as “having an issue with children.” The solution was to work on ridding the dog of that “issue,” while seeking childless adopters who could keep the dog away from children.

Language modification also helped lessen the image of dangerous animals so they might appear as “nice, soft.” One group of no-kill trainers was particularly concerned, for legal reasons, about written records that created an image of dogs as vicious, perhaps indiscriminate biters. They started a “language project team” not to “hide data,” but

[T]o be cautious. If somebody reports something, even if it’s literally a puppy who puppy-bit, that would go down on the record. We are trying to clean up all that junk. . . trying to make a big distinction between when a dog play-bites versus really bites. We are giving people who do the reporting a multiple-choice form rather than letting them editorialize about it. [One choice is] “dog play-bit hard with bruising.”

In any case keeping compromised animals alive or warehousing them was not as bad as killing them, according to no-kill respondents. They countered criticism with the charge that euthanasia itself was often cruel by definition, if not by practice, because most shelter ani-

mals could be kept alive and even adopted. Some methods of euthanasia were easier for critics to decry on the grounds that they caused animal suffering. For example critics of a shelter that used carbon monoxide deemed this gassing to be morally “wrong” and “cruel” because animals cried out in pain or fear and saw other animals dying (Gilyard 2001). The more common method used, injection of lethal drugs, still was attacked as cruel.

Moreover most no-kill workers felt that if adverse “warehousing” existed it was at a facility other than their own. Some no-kill proponents were very clear that shelters whose mission was to adopt animals should not keep unadoptable animals in too-small quarters for extended periods of time; to do so was considered inhumane. Other advocates acknowledged that these abuses probably occurred in at least some no-kill facilities, but they were marginalized and viewed as exceptions rather than as representing the vast majority of no-kill shelters. Indeed one common way to create this “bad egg” hierarchy was to refer to the abusing facility as a “sanctuary” (used here pejoratively) rather than a no-kill shelter, thereby distancing it from “better” organizations.

In fact no-kill proponents felt that keeping behaviorally or medically difficult animals was a sign of success and an opportunity to save more animals, rather than evidence of their insensitivity or cruelty. One hopeful no-killer said these animals were a challenge to rehabilitate, and her goal was to make ever sicker animals into adoptable ones: “We are raising the bar for what we can handle medically or behaviorally. We’ve got animals with chronic health conditions. We’ve got aggressive dogs. We are trying to rehabilitate them so they can be made adoptable.” By “raising the bar,” no-kill workers felt they were attempting to reduce suffering in animals rather than increase it through prolonged caging. For the most part, they denied the latter happened. For example, when discussing a highly

aggressive dog who had been sheltered for eighteen months, a no-kill worker said the animal was not a candidate for euthanasia because that “means you are ending suffering, and he is quite enjoying his life.”

## Toward a Common Ground

Unearthing the manifest and latent tensions behind the open-admission and no-kill perspectives suggests that a large and perhaps insurmountable gulf exists between the camps. However it would be wrong to portray these differences as antithetical. Situations exist where each camp’s defenses are down, vulnerable to concession or change. This offers hope of a common ground between camps that would improve dialogue, enhance cooperation, and mollify tensions. Four bases exist that auger well for such change, including internal dissent, shared values, mutual identification, and maturation and change.

### Internal Dissent

Far from public posturing that yields rigid ideological distinctions, there was internal dissent within the open-admission and no-kill camps over the proper handling of specific shelter animals—a dissent that mirrors the same criticisms made between the camps.<sup>5</sup> It was common to find some workers within open-admission and no-kill shelters who were uneasy with their own shelter’s ideology but remained on the job because they strongly believed in the importance of voicing an alternative view in their own shelter, even if this marginalized them from peers. In larger facilities, there were cliques devoted to such dissent, but they, too, felt alienated from their own shelter’s dominant outlook on these issues. Whether individuals or cliques, the concerns of these workers came to a head over the handling of particular shelter cases.

For example workers within some

no-kill shelters sometimes debated the appropriateness of their facility’s stance on euthanasia when that issue was raised for certain animals. As they discussed the fate of these animals, workers mulled over the various arguments now associated with the no-kill or open-admission perspective. Workers at one no-kill facility were sharply divided over the proposed euthanasia of several dogs with threatening behavior who had been sheltered for several months. Most strongly opposed the death of these animals, believing that their quality of life was satisfactory and that their risky behavior was modifiable, while some supported it on the grounds that their lengthy caging adversely affected them and that they were dangerous to adopt out. Those in the dissenting minority espoused a view that at times was closer to the open-admission than the no-kill stance, since it saw euthanasia as an acceptable alternative to the deleterious effects of long confinement. The two factions within the shelter were engaging in a meta-discussion about the proper handling of all shelter animals who faced a similar quandary. At this general level, they were debating and considering the merits of both no-kill and open-admission stances; this process allowed for the possibility that features of these perspectives might be merged.

Open-admission shelters also had their share of internal dissent. Traditionally, workers who became attached to individual animals quietly resisted the euthanasia of their “favorites” or, over time, quit because of “burnout” from the routine of killing. Perhaps empowered by the no-kill movement and seepage of its ideas into the open-admission camp, these workers were more willing than in the past to express doubts about the rationale for euthanasia and to garner support for such resistance from fellow workers. At these times, workers and shelter managers, much like those in no-kill shelters, debated the appropriateness of euthanasia in ways that echoed sentiments from both camps.

This dissent can become a building block for establishing a common ground. Although twenty years ago individuals in shelters expressed doubts about their shelter’s policies, these questions were unlikely to have credibility because they were coming from a single person having no larger voice. Instead of having their objections considered seriously, dissenters probably risked being seen as “problem children,” “difficult employees,” not “team members,” or the like, with the expectation that they needed to adjust to the job, become silent, or leave. With the growth of the no-kill movement and crystallization of the open-admission identity, dissenters now can name, and thereby attach their individual doubts to, something larger and more legitimate. When they speak it is from a position of strength. Giving voice to both perspectives provides an opportunity for healthy, albeit critical, debate and discussion at the ground level. Such empowered discussions within shelters make it possible for previously defensive workers to hear the other camp’s views.

### Shared Values

While internal dissent over the management of specific cases permitted the expression of opposing views within each camp, there also was more general evidence of mutual subscription to fundamental sheltering goals. When their guards were down, many respondents spoke about their work in ways that were far less polarized than the sheltering oral culture and literature suggested. Linguistic flashpoints used for public consumption and for posturing by spokespersons were not necessarily accurate reflections of the feelings and actions of everyday workers. If workers were confronted about their use of these terms, stark and inflammatory distinctions started to blur or fade. In fact, there was some agreement as to the meaning of important language that typically divided the camps. In this regard people in both camps demonstrated common rather than

conflicting values about basic issues and concerns faced by all.

To some degree both camps had similar views of what constituted “suffering” and what conditions justified euthanasia. Despite what open admissionists assumed about no-killers, many of the latter were willing, in principle, to euthanize animals when their “fates were worse than death,” a position championed by open admissionists. As one no-kill advocate claimed: “I haven’t heard one person [at the no-kill facility] saying, ‘Yeah, I think it is much better if we let the animal go on the highway then euthanize them. . . . Better the animal is free and roaming around with mange and starving to death than to be killed.’ I think that’s nutty. [Is that cruel?] Absolutely. Absolutely. I would pick euthanasia over that.” Another no-kill proponent, agreeing with this view, likened the plight of some animals whose suffering merited death to that of humans facing dire situations. This no-kill worker criticized “sanctuaries” that kept animals alive to the point where they suffered, arguing that humans do not let that happen to each other. In her words,

If you are not being humane, and the animal is in mental or physical distress, that may be considered a ‘sanctuary’ [living out their lives until they end naturally]. Technically we don’t even do that for humans anymore. If someone is in pain, they usually are put on a morphine drip with the dosage slowly increased to reduce their discomfort. The reality is morphine suppresses the respiration.

Other no-kill respondents also spoke of euthanasia as a humane option by comparing the plight of some shelter animals with that of humans isolated from society. As one said,

What happens when you confine humans? What happens when you put humans in mental institutions? You can make it acceptable for some time for some dogs. Some can handle kenneling. Oth-

ers need the bond. . . [of] something or someone, and sitting in that kennel is not the same for them. They just can’t hack it.

Members of both camps also saw almost all shelter animals as potentially adoptable and not requiring euthanasia, despite their physical and emotional limitations. Sounding quite like a no-kill advocate, one open-admissionist explained: “Most of the animals we kill are to us adoptable. That’s why we don’t use the word adoptable in any of our literature. A kitten with two legs who is four weeks old is adoptable to a person who wants to adopt her. Adoptability is only about who wants this animal. We had a thirteen-year-old dog with no front legs. She gets around. She kisses everyone. And she was placed.” Of course, some open-admission respondents did not work in shelters that had resources to treat or keep such compromised and difficult-to-adopt animals. But they clung just as strongly as their no-kill peers to the hope that almost every shelter animal, regardless of disability, age, or unattractiveness, could be placed if given sufficient time.

Most respondents from both camps saw shelters—even the “best” of them—as unhealthy, if not destructive, environments for animals. Everyone agreed that, in an ideal world, shelters would not exist or, if they did, would serve only as temporary way stations to rehabilitate and home needy animals. One no-kill worker admitted that even her own “nice” shelter was “still” a shelter, as she questioned the “quality of life” of one animal who had been in her shelter for more than five hundred days. “I don’t care how wonderful we make it for them, they are still institutionalized. Caretakers are there for thirty minutes to an hour and then the dog is alone, not able to do any of the innate things that a dog is supposed to be doing.” Another no-kill worker agreed with this sentiment, saying, “We’ve had dogs here for a year or two and you look at when they came in

versus when they went out or were put to sleep, and they get worse not better. Shelters aren’t always great places for dogs. And the longer they are here, the more likely we are to make them worse.”

Recognition of shared values is an important tool for building common ground. Most workers in both camps are not absolutists; they neither unthinkingly carry out every euthanasia nor rigidly oppose every possibility. Despite such overlap in values, however, most workers believed that members of the other camp did not share their own broad, if not ambiguous, perspective toward fundamental animal sheltering issues. This thinking served only to polarize further the no-kill controversy because it emphasized differences in values and exaggerated the ideological distance between the two camps. Discovering, noting, and acknowledging shared values would help proponents and workers “see” their common interests and change their current thinking and practice.

## Mutual Identification

Although public posturing toward and stereotyping of the no-kill and open-admission approaches commonly occurred, when individuals aired their thoughts in private, they sometimes identified with those in the opposing camp. Research on pro-life and pro-choice supporters also has found their differences to be less pronounced than their public rhetoric (Dworkin 1993; Kaufman 1999). Among shelter workers, mutual identification was evident when respondents spoke informally with peers or with the author; at these times, political and rhetorical guards were lowered enough to reveal more overlap in humane identities than many might realize or admit.

For example, there were occasional expressions of empathy for workers in the other camp. No-killers, as seen earlier, reported pity for open-admission workers who had to euthanize animals, or even work in a shelter

that did this, because of the emotional toll such actions were believed to take. One no-kill worker felt that open-admission shelter staff might resent the greater resources available to the few well-endowed no-kill shelters. She explained,

It's a horrible thing to have to euthanize animals every day. I feel fortunate that I am working in an organization where we don't have to do that. I can understand them [open-admission shelters] being resentful that we have the resources that we do and are able to run things the way we do. And that is where this [tension] is coming from. They have the same amount of compassion that we do have, but because they have fewer resources, they can't do what we do.

Open admissionists sometimes pitied no-kill workers who had to say "no" to people wanting to drop off their pets, only to tell them there was no room or a very long waiting list and that they either had to take their animals to some other shelter, go to a veterinarian for euthanasia, or find a neighbor or friend to adopt the animal. One respondent said that he thought it was at least as upsetting for no-killers to tell many people "no" as it was to euthanize animals "eight hours a day." How hard, he conjectured, it must be to turn away people who sometimes are pleading for their animals to be taken. He even computed the number of people who are told "no" at a prominent sanctuary, estimating many thousand each year, and finding the thought of doing this to be mind boggling.

Mutual identification was manifested in ways other than pity. There was recognition by some that, in the end, both camps resorted to a similar process for deciding the fate of animals when space became limited. At these times, said one respondent, "You go through your populations and you are going to try and euthanize the animals that are the least placeable...the ones with the worst health, or the oldest, or the ones not

doing well in the shelter environment." Workers who shared this thinking felt that their peers in the other camp were forced to go through the same excruciating decision making to decide the fate of shelter animals. Because they did this too, they felt collegial and cohesive rather than confrontational and competitive.

Identifying and acknowledging mutual identification can help to lessen the present polarization that leads to overgeneralization and blanket assumptions about those in the opposite camp. In such a hostile environment, people are likely to feel unfairly and negatively judged by others, and certainly unappreciated for their emotional and ethical labors. Sympathy can be the starting point that opens lines of communication and support for different, but not necessarily antagonistic, ways of managing shelter animals.

## Maturation and Change

New common ground will be discovered over time as the "no-kill issue" matures in the humane community. This is likely to happen as more people reject simplistic characterizations of the no-kill "debate" or "controversy" that pit one camp against the other, even though the present study could be faulted for doing so. Although many people consider the no-kill controversy to be highly polarized, it is more accurate to think of it as a range of views about the appropriateness of killing shelter animals. While some tension no doubt occurs as these differences are negotiated, a working order probably will be created that, despite occasional bumpiness, allows most shelters to draw on and be comfortable with different perspectives toward euthanasia. This diversity of views should be seen as a healthy form of organizational conflict that allows both perspectives to exist under the same roof. Such a plan means that the humane community will have to live with some residual uneasiness about the nature and

role of euthanasia and to see that discomfort as a sign of correctly managing a complex and subtle issue.

As the no-kill issue matures, other organizational changes are likely to reduce the distance between camps. Some no-kill groups will become institutionalized over time, if they have not already, moving them closer to a humane centrist position. As this happens, they will reject, with the same conviction and vehemence as traditional humane groups, "fringe" or "lunatic" groups also claiming to be no-kill. Some no-kill leaders have acknowledged the existence of these marginal "shelters," and the need for them to be improved or eliminated. More centrist no-kill organizations will move to some degree toward the open-admission camp. To wit, there has been some response to the open-admission plea for less provocative language and to stop using the label "no kill" or inflammatory terms that compare open admissionists to Nazis, criminals, or other killers. Aware that the no-kill language hurts or angers others, some in the movement sympathize with this concern and have curtailed use of such terms. In one instance the director of a major no-kill shelter publicly acknowledged that, because the term *no-kill* can offend others, he consciously tries to stop using it when speaking publicly. And several shelters whose policies were no-kill in practice and principal refused to label themselves as no-kill because they had various problems with the term's meaning and its effect on open-admission shelters and staff. In one case, the president of a no-kill shelter claimed that she did not "tout" her organization as no kill:

The only reason we are "no kill" is because, unlike animal shelters, we have the ability to turn people away... Just because one organization is not killing does not mean that animals are not dying en masse. The animals we unfortunately must turn away very likely end up at the end of a needle in a shelter. (Stinson 1997)

Finally, the organizer of the national



no-kill conference decided to drop “no kill” from the name of this meeting, so as to include rather than exclude people from the open-admission perspective. The organizer renamed it the “Conference on Homeless Animal Management and Policy.”

More progressive open-admission groups, in turn, are likely to rethink their mission and identity, moving somewhat closer to the no-kill camp by adopting more aggressive adoption policies; questioning long-standing definitions of what constitutes “acceptable” rates of euthanasia; and trying to lower these rates. Some open admissionists also have shown a willingness to embrace a no-kill identity in their speaking. For instance at one shelter that has had great success in controlling dog overpopulation, a senior staff member commented, “We are no-kill with puppies.” Even if said tongue in cheek, his language suggests a recognition that no-kill is a worthy aim and a sign of success. A few open admissionists are even styling themselves as “no-kill advocates,” although this is laughable to no-kill workers. Perhaps there is more substance to this claim; certainly, no shelter worker wants to euthanize animals. If these organizational changes take place, friction between camps will subside, leaving a small number of marginalized humane organizations outside the boundaries of mainstream shelter culture.

## Conclusion

Maturation and change in the no-kill controversy is likely to lead to new language and ideology for speaking and thinking about issues facing all shelter workers. This will happen as the humane community chooses not to fan the fires of current tensions, or even focus on them, but rather to look upon them as an opportunity to redefine to shelter workers and the public its identity and mission. Some divergent ideas from both camps will become synthesized and appeal to most shelter workers, while others

will be dropped by the wayside because they lack this broad interest. The result will be a new humane ideology that can be embraced by no-kill and open-admission advocates alike.

This change will require refashioning the meaning of familiar concepts or creating entirely fresh ones that bridge tensions rather than create them. The very ambiguity of such terms as *shelter*, *humane*, and *euthanasia* frustrates people, but this vagueness can benefit those who want to give them new meanings that resonate for all shelter workers. To bridge the tensions, superordinate concepts must draw from common ground between camps—shared practices, values, and identities—so that most workers can agree with and extol them in professional and public arenas.

The notion of welfare could serve aptly as one superordinate concept to unite rather than divide the shelter community. Although somewhat tricky to reinvent because of its present political connotations in the general animal community, the term nevertheless has the potential to bridge tensions underlying the no-kill debate, just as others have suggested using the concept of welfare to quell the abortion controversy (Kaufmann 1999). Concern for the welfare of animals deeply motivates both no-kill and open-admission advocates. It is a major area of common ground, leading virtually all shelter workers, regardless of their camp, to preserve and improve the quality of life for animals. When threads of common ground surface in dialogue between members of the two camps, workers can understand how the same concern for animals triggers one person’s decision to be no kill, the other’s to be open admission. The lifework inspired by this motivation is different for the two camps, but it is work that both parties can admire. Focusing on this common ground can foster mutual respect, as the enemy image is replaced by the actual presence of another shelter worker strug-

gling to respond to the difficult situations of everyday life. Workers see for themselves that within their world views is a shared concern for animals.

Certainly there are many other notions, long familiar to shelter workers, that can be infused with new meaning to connect rather than separate open-admission and no-kill supporters. Indeed, entirely new concepts unfamiliar to the shelter world may be brought into this community to bridge its camps. Whether old ideas are being reinvented or new ones are being imported, to succeed they must be based on common ground between camps. The challenge facing the American sheltering community is to discover additional bases for this common ground and to articulate a new language to reaffirm it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>My use of the term *kill*, except when specifically discussing its meaning to shelter workers or quoting them directly, is made without symbolic or political connotation.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this report the terms *open admission* and *no kill* are used because most members of the respective camps accept these labels as self descriptions, while rejecting other terms for themselves. Open-admission advocates reject the label “kill shelter,” and even the less sensitive language of “full service” or “traditional” are received ambivalently. Similarly no-kill proponents reject the term *limited admission* for their facilities.

<sup>3</sup>Open-admission advocates use the same argument against no-kill proponents when they contend, in so many words, that “all that money and effort on keeping animals alive keeps them from their mission of preventing births in the first place.”

<sup>4</sup>While this piggybacking on the pro-life movement’s symbolism offers cachet to the no-kill identity, it also escalates the controversy because it confuses two reasons for believing that euthanasia is often, if not always, wrong. Like the pro-life movement’s ideological confusion over whether it is wrong to abort a fetus because the fetus has a right to live or because all life has intrinsic value (Dworkin 1993), the no-kill movement’s confused ideology argues both that the unwanted or undesirable shelter animal has a

right to live and that euthanasia as commonly practiced shows disrespect for animal and human life.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to be cautious about the significance of such dissent, especially when it involves a new social movement. Rather than serving as a common ground, internal diversity and emotional fervor can divide and weaken camps. Hints of this can be seen in tensions between behavior/training staff and adoption staff in some no-kill shelters or, at a different level, between doctrinaire no-kill advocates and other no-kill proponents who occasionally resort to euthanizing their animals.

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