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Pets in Danger: Exploring the Link between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

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Pets in Danger: Exploring the Link between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse

ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that domestic violence (DV) victims who seek refuge in DV shelters often report the abuse of companion animals as a form of psychological control. However, these studies have mainly involved the use of interviews and questionnaires which restrict the quality and depth of data collected (e.g. these methods increase the probability that victims will withhold information due to embarrassment or ethical constraints). The current study utilized a novel method previously overlooked in the literature on companion animal abuse in an attempt to overcome these problems; domestic violence victims' stories of companion animal abuse were obtained from online forums where victims voluntarily shared their experiences. Seventy-four stories were analyzed using thematic analysis and four key themes were identified: *The Victim-Companion Animal Bond*; *Companion Animals Used to Control Victims*; *Victims' Perceptions of Abusers' Behavior*; and *Support for Victims and Companion Animals*. A number of DV victims reported that companion animals were one of their main sources of support, and many chose to stay in an abusive relationship because DV shelters did not have the facilities to house their pets. Findings have policy implications for police, DV shelters, child protection organizations, and animal welfare organizations.

Keywords: Domestic violence (DV); Intimate partner violence (IPV); Child protection organizations; Companion animals; Animal cruelty; Animal abuse

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The link between domestic violence and companion animal abuse

A growing body of literature indicates that domestic violence (DV) is related to companion animal abuse (e.g. Ascione, 1998; Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Heath, Maruyama & Hayashi, 2007; Boat, 2014; Carlisle-Frank, Frank & Nielsen, 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Flynn, 2000a, 2000b, 2009; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber & Miles, 2013; Hartman, Hageman, Williams & Ascione, 2015; Hartman, Hageman, Williams, Mary & Ascione, 2016; Jorgenson & Maloney, 1999; Knight, Ellis & Simmons, 2014; McDonald, Collins, Nicotera, Hageman, Ascione, Williams, & Graham-Bermann, 2015; McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione & Williams, 2016; McPhedran, 2009; Tiplady, Walsh & Phillips, 2012; Volant. Johnson, Gullone & Coleman, 2008). Most research in this area has involved interviewing and/or administering questionnaires to victims in DV shelters to determine the prevalence of companion animal abuse, and a number of studies have reported that approximately half of DV victims have witnessed threats toward, or the actual abuse of a companion animal. Carlisle-Frank et al. (2004) found that companion animal abuse was reported by 53% of DV victims in shelters in New York, and Allen, Gallagher and Jones (2006) reported that 57% of 23 women in DV shelters in Ireland had witnessed the abuse of a companion animal. In another study, Ascione et al. (2007) found that 54% of 101 DV victims interviewed in shelters in Utah reported that their partner had harmed or killed a companion animal, compared to 5% of a control group of non-DV victims. Similarly, Volant et al. (2008) interviewed 102 DV victims in Australia and found that 52.9% reported the abuse of a companion animal, compared to 0% of a control group of 102 non-DV victims. In a later study which interviewed 19 women in DV shelters in Illinois, Hardesty et al. (2013) found that 47% of victims reported the abuse of a companion animal at the hands of a controlling partner. More recently, Hartman et al. (2015) found that 11.7% of 291 victims residing in DV shelters or receiving non-residential services from a DV agency in the US had witnessed threats toward a

companion animal, and that 26.1% had witnessed the actual harm of an animal. However, as the authors note, these findings represent a lower rate of companion animal abuse than found in other studies that have not included a large proportion of Hispanic participants. Faver and Strand (2007) also reported a lower prevalence rate of companion animal abuse among Hispanic DV victims (36%), and Simmons and Lehmann (2007) reported a prevalence rate of 25% among DV victims in Texas, although they did not state whether this lower rate was attributable to the inclusion of Hispanic participants.

1.2. How companion animals are abused by domestic violence perpetrators

Research has found that the abuse of companion animals is a coercive tactic used by DV perpetrators to control their partners (Allen et al., 2006; Faver & Strand, 2007; Flynn 2000b; McDonald et al., 2015). Allen et al. (2006) asked DV victims to ascribe motivations for their partners' abuse of companion animals, and found that of the 13 women who reported such abuse, 92% believed that pets were abused to control them or their children (the remaining participant did not respond to the question). Consistent with other research on motivations for abuse (e.g. Arkow, 1995; Ascione, 1999), most women ascribed more than one motivation for its onset, including anger and revenge, or revenge and punishment. In their study which interviewed children about experiences of companion animal abuse in domestically violent homes, McDonald et al. (2015) found that many children believed that threats and harm directed at pets aimed to create and maintain fear in the home, isolate the mother, and prevent or punish the mother's attempts to be independent or leave the relationship. Many participants also reported that companion animals were maltreated as a form of punishment for undesirable behaviors, and that their siblings (as well as a parent) had engaged in animal abuse. This latter finding is consistent with suggestions that generalized physical violence may occur in some homes, where lines are blurred between victims and perpetrators (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). Other research has found that DV perpetrators can threaten companion animals to coerce their partners into committing illegal acts (Loring & Bolden-Hines, 2004), and that animal abuse can be used to control and intimidate children to ensure that they remain quiet about the abuse they have witnessed (Adams, 1998; Becker & French, 2004).

1.3. The effects of companion animal abuse on human victims of domestic violence

Many DV victims report strong emotional bonds with their companion animals, often describing them as family members (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn; 2000b; Lacroix, 1998; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). DV perpetrators can exploit this bond to emotionally harm human victims, or use these methods to coerce them to return to the relationship (Upadhya, 2013). In addition to adult victims of DV, children also often witness companion animal abuse (Allen et al., 2006; Baldry, 2003; Browne, Hensley, & McGuffee, 2016; Flynn, 2000b; Henry, 2004; McDonald et al., 2015; Miller & Knutson, 1997; Thompson & Gullone, 2006), and children who witness such abuse exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems compared to other children (Girardi & Pozzulo, 2015; McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2016). Furthermore, witnessing abuse can desensitize a child to violence (Ascione, 1993), and lead them to engage in similar behaviors toward animals or humans (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Franklin & Kercher, 2012; Levitt, Hoffer, & Loper, 2016).

1.4. The current study

Whilst the aforementioned studies have furthered our understanding about the prevalence of companion animal abuse and DV victims' experiences of animal abuse, questionnaire-based studies in this area are limited in terms of how much in-depth data they can provide about what appears to be a complex web of abusive behavior. Interview-based studies also have their drawbacks. For example, interviewees may experience feelings of shame and embarrassment, or be susceptible to social desirability effects. In addition, interviews may deter victims from truthfully sharing their experiences once they are aware that researchers have a duty to disclose certain information to the authorities (such as expressions of self-harm/intention to harm another person, and information pertaining to a child at risk of abuse). Another limitation of research which directly accesses DV victims is that it may typically capture more serious incidents of DV/animal abuse which may limit our understanding of the full spectrum of these behaviors (e.g. shelters may house victims who have experienced more prolonged and/or serious abuse). Furthermore, the use of participant inclusion criteria limits the collection of data from the outset in some studies. For example, in recent research (Hartman et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016), adult victims were only eligible to be interviewed if they had experienced

DV within the past 12 months, had a companion animal living with them within this timeframe, and had at least one child aged 7-12 years living in the home. It therefore cannot be determined how far their findings extend to individuals who have experienced DV (or had a companion animal) at a point further in the past, as well as victims without children in this age group (or who do not have children living with them). Finally, because studies in this area have tended to utilize small samples in specific regions (e.g. Hardesty et al., 2013 who interviewed 19 DV victims in Illinois), findings may not be generalizable.

The current study sought to address these limitations by qualitatively analyzing stories of companion animal abuse posted voluntarily by DV victims in online discussion forums. This method bypasses the problems associated with interviewing victims noted above, and increases the likelihood that the data collected will be more wide-ranging and generalizable to victims of DV worldwide. Given that some victims do not recognize or define their relationships as abusive (Barnett, 2001), or have concerns about the reactions of others when disclosing experiences of DV (Edwards et al., 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014), online forums may provide an important platform where victims are encouraged to discuss their own, perhaps less serious, experiences of abuse. Specifically, the current study sought to explore DV victims' freely discussed experiences of companion animal abuse, including how pets are maltreated, the circumstances in which victims experience the abuse of their pets (e.g. during certain times of the day or after engaging in certain behaviors), how victims explain abusers' behaviour (i.e. their perceptions of perpetrators' motivations for animal abuse), whether certain patterns of behavior could be identified. (e.g. whether animal abuse tends to precede or follow human abuse), and the effect of companion animal abuse on adult victims as well as children.

2. METHOD

2.1. Identification of stories

Anonymous stories of animal abuse within the context of domestic violence (DV) were obtained from online discussion forums where victims voluntarily shared their experiences. Data were collected over a period of twelve months (February 2014 to February 2015) by the author and five assistants (hereafter referred to as investigators), and only forums which contained stories written in the English language were searched for and analyzed. Forums were located by entering a number of different search terms into the five most popular search engines listed by *eBizMBA Rank* (2014), a continually updated average of each website's *Alexa* Global Traffic Rank. These search engines were Google, Yahoo, Bing, Ask, and AOL. A number of search terms were generated on the basis of commonly used terminology relating to DV and animal abuse in the literature, and adding terms such as "discussion board", "forum" and so forth. The search terms were agreed upon by the investigators and included: "Domestic violence stories", "Domestic violence forum", "Domestic violence discussion board", "Experiences of domestic violence", "Animal abuse stories", "Animal abuse forum", "Experiences of animal abuse", "Domestic violence and animal abuse stories", "Domestic violence and animal abuse forum", "Pet abuse stories", "Pet abuse forum", "Experiences of pet abuse", "Partner violence forum", "Partner violence stories", "Experiences of partner violence", "Intimate partner violence stories", "Intimate partner violence forum", "Experiences of intimate partner violence", "Intimate partner abuse stories" , "Intimate partner abuse forums", "Domestic violence and pet abuse forum" , and "Domestic violence and pet abuse stories". All investigators searched for stories using the same search terms and a list of suitable websites/forums was compiled. In keeping with the British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2013) *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research*, the names and addresses of forums are not stated here as this "may compromise the anonymity of individuals or have a negative effect on an online community" (p.18).

Investigators entered the same words/phrases into the 'search' boxes in the forums, such as "Animal abuse", "Animal cruelty", "Animal neglect", "Animal welfare", "Pet violence", "Pet abuse", "Being

cruel to animals", "Harming", "Kicking", "Throwing", "Attacking", "Pet", "Pets", "Animal" "Animals", "Dog" "Dogs", "Cat" "Cats", "Rabbit", "Rabbits" and so forth. Individual feeds were also reviewed manually for relevant stories since the search function on some sites had limited utility. For example, investigators scrolled through individual stories, looking out for words/phrases such as "animal", "dog", "cat", "threw", "cruel to my dog", "would hurt the dog unless I…" etc. in order to identify stories which referred to incidents of animal neglect or deliberate cruelty in the context of a domestically violent relationship. Stories were collected from forums until data saturation was reached (i.e. until the investigators no longer found new categories and variations within categories, in keeping with Willig, 2013).

Only publicly available information was sought and recorded; no forums were accessed which required the use of log-in details, since it would have been unethical to pose as a victim of DV. For this reason, it was not possible to converse with users to collect demographic data. The use of publically available information meant that it was not necessary to obtain consent from the individuals conversing within the forum. Ethical approval was granted by the author's University Research Ethics Committee and the research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2013). The stories were saved in a password protected document and duplicate stories were deleted. Seventy-seven stories were identified but three were excluded because they contained information which was very personal in nature (such as the name of a family member) and so these were omitted immediately at this stage. Thus, seventy-four stories in total were retained for analysis.

2.2. Data analysis

Investigators independently analyzed the 74 stories using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was considered the most appropriate method of analysis as the research sought to describe and interpret DV victims' stories of animal abuse, and to take the context of behaviors into account. Content analysis, on the other hand, places more emphasis on interpretation of behaviors (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013), and has been criticized for not considering their context due to its

overreliance on the frequency of codes (Morgan, 1993). Inductive thematic analysis was used because coded categories were identified from data collected from previously under-studied sources (online forums), unlike deductive thematic analysis which is more useful when the aim of the analysis is to test a previous theory or to compare categories/themes at different time points (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In accordance with the method described by Braun and Clarke (2006), each investigator initially read the stories several times to familiarize themselves with interesting aspects of the data. Following this, investigators independently recorded points of interest across the whole data set as codes. Codes were then collated into potential themes and reviewed to ensure that they were consistent with the coded extracts across the data set. In accordance with Sandelowski and Leeman (2012), a theme was defined as a coherent integration of disparate pieces of data. Following this, each investigator generated a thematic map which visually presented the codes, themes and their relationships with the aim of identifying coherent but distinctive themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

The senior investigator calculated the average percentage of agreement between each investigator with regards the themes identified, and a good level of inter-coder reliability was reached (92 percent). This method of calculating percentage agreement is considered an important criterion for assessing the value and rigour of qualitative research (e.g. Holsti, 1969; Mays & Pope, 1995; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2007).

Although content analysis permits data to be quantified as well as analyzed qualitatively (Gbrich, 2007), thematic analysis provides a purely qualitative account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this reason, the categories and themes identified in the current study are not described in quantitative terms. The limitations of attempting to quantify qualitative data have been discussed elsewhere (see Basit, 2003; Loffe & Yardley, 2004; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). For example, if a particular word or coding category were to be identified more frequently in the stories of some DV victims than others then this could suggest more importance, but it may instead mean that these individuals were more willing to discuss the issue in detail. As Vaismoradi et al. (2013) note, “the importance of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p.403).

3. RESULTS

From the analysis of the 74 stories, four themes were identified: *The Victim-Companion Animal Bond*; *Companion Animals Used to Control Victims*; *Victims' Perceptions of Abusers' Behavior*; and *Support for Victims and Companion Animals*. Each theme consisted of subthemes which are presented below. Extracts taken from the stories are provided to illustrate each theme and subtheme; these quoted extracts were chosen based on how clear and representative they were of the themes (they do not intend to represent all of the data that was identified as being relevant to a theme). These themes are discussed later in relation to existing literature.

3.1. Theme 1: The Victim-Companion Animal Bond

The first theme was *The Victim-Companion Animal Bond* which comprised four subthemes. The first subtheme was *Companion Animals Possessing Characteristics the Perpetrator Lacks*. A number of victims talked about companion animals not judging them or letting them down, unlike their abusive partners, and that they were grateful for their pets' affection. One victim stated: "*The dog is grateful for everything I do, shows me affection, and is nicer to me. He also seeks and enjoys my company. Unlike someone",* and another said *"*M*y cats never let me down, unlike him".* The second subtheme was *Companion Animals Providing Emotional Support for Victims and Children.* Here, a number of victims explained the extent to which they valued the closeness of their pet:

> *Animals can be so supportive in times of crisis.*

> *The dogs were my only support system.*

> *My dog was the only reason I remained sane throughout the violent ordeal.*

> *My cats were the only friends I had before I left; they got me through so much.*

My rabbit is like my best friend, as daft as it sounds. I talk to her all the time and she just sits on my lap and listens to me moan.

In addition to being a source of emotional support for adult victims, a number of stories illustrated that companion animals provided relief for children:

My daughter always ran off to be with the dog when we argued.

My dog was a calming mechanism for both myself and for the children in the tense abusive situations we used to be in constantly. We would spend ten minutes cuddling him and everything would seem so much better.

I feared for the safety of my dog. He was my child's best friend.

I've gone everywhere trying to keep my apartment because I know that after all the abuse the kids and me have been through, losing our home and pets who have helped us through all the violence emotionally would kill them.

The third subtheme within Theme 1 was *Companion Animals Protecting the Victim.* A number of victims reported that their pets provided them with physical protection from violent partners:

When my dog heard me scream, he laid on top of me. I tried to get him off but he took the first punches. The dog attacked him but only to be beaten and thrown outside.

My son's dog was trying to protect us.

We were so close that one of the dogs would cuddle into me when my ex approached.

He actually saved my life staying with me 24 hours a day.

The final subtheme within Theme 1 was *Risk-Taking to Protect a Companion Animal.* Here, many victims stated that they had stayed in the abusive environment, or left then returned in order to try to keep their pets safe:

When I tried to leave he would say that he would kill the dog, so I would go back and get beaten in order to save his life.

He had the dogs and was persistently beating them. I tried to stop him. He pushed me to the ground and carried on with his destruction. I picked up my unconscious dog and carried her to the house. I hid her and immediately returned hoping to save the other dog's life.

One victim discussed these types of risk-taking behaviors stating *"Why do we put ourselves in danger to protect others yet do not protect ourselves?"* In contrast, some victims reported occasions where they did not take risks to protect their pets as they prioritized their own safety, or were fearful of the abuser's behavior:

I was paralyzed with fear and too frightened to do anything so I did not try and stop him.

When he smashed the fish tank I sat there stunned and unable to move.

'That's what she gets' he said after throwing the dog against the wall. I didn't do anything as he looked really angry and I knew that he would start on me if I supported her.

He told me if I went to the aid of my injured dog he would shoot it.

It must be borne in mind, however, that although these particular individuals did not report engaging in risk taking behavior to protect their companion animals, this is not to say that they did not do so at other points in time, or at different stages in the abusive relationship.

3.2. Theme 2: Companion Animals Used to Control Victims

The second theme identified was *Companion Animals Used to Control Victims*. One victim made it clear that her partner was using violence, or the threat of it, to control her: "*Constant threats to me, the pets and the children showed us what he was capable of doing if we crossed the line".* This theme comprised three subthemes, the first of which was *Isolation.* This subtheme encompassed how abusive partners tried to isolate victims by restricting their contact with friends and family:

> *I was scared of what he would do to my animals if I wasn't there to watch them as I didn't have any family or friends for support.*

> *I left my job to live with him and I can't talk to them* [friends and family] *about the abuse myself and my pets go through.*

The second subtheme within Theme 2 was *Financial Control,* which related to abusers preventing victims from spending money. For example, one victim stated that "*He started taking my money away and destroyed my credit card*", and another said: "*My dog was whining in pain and wouldn't feed her puppies. My husband forbade me to seek veterinary help and refused to give me any money for her to be treated".* This subtheme links to the subtheme of 'Isolation' above since financial control is another way to isolate the victim; not only has the abuser restricted how often the victim can go out/spend time with friends and family, they have also restricted their spending, which makes them more reliant on the abuser. Sadly, in some cases where a victim disobeyed the abuser's wishes, this resulted in the abuse of an animal: "*He discovered I had lied about spending money when he found a receipt. In a rage he threw my beloved dog out of the window of our third floor flat",* and *"When I refused to give*

him money he made me watch his dog eat my hamster". The third subtheme within Theme 2 was *Preventing the Victim from Leaving or Coercing them to Return,* which was identified in a number of extracts, for example:

> *He told me if I left he would put poison in my cat's milk.*

> *He said 'I've told you you're not going, and if you do I will drown that cat, don't think I'm joking' - so I didn't go.*

> *Based on previously being raped, he threatened to 'teach the dog' how to rape me if I step out of line again [try to leave].*

Although these individuals did not refer to actual physical violence, the warning of such behavior was enough to coerce them into staying for the safety of the animal. One victim demonstrated awareness that threats of animal abuse were likely to be actioned by the abuser, which forced them to comply with their requests to prevent the pet being harmed: "*He had done it previously so I knew if I left he would kill my pets. Any pets I left with him would be dead within the day".* In other cases, the abuse went beyond threats and manifested in physical harm of the animal when the victim threatened to leave the abusive home:

> *He held my daughter's cat out the window and said he would drop it if we did not come home.*

> *When I threatened to leave after he almost broke my jaw, he tied some string around my dog's neck until the dog couldn't breathe, and wouldn't let my dog go until I promised I would stay.*

> *I went to my parents after an argument and he told me to come home otherwise he would hurt my cat. One night he injured me so badly my parents refused to let me go back and he stabbed the cat.*

Of the victims who managed to flee the abusive environment on what they thought would be a permanent basis, yet who couldn't take their pets with them, a few said that they felt guilty for leaving them, which resulted in them returning home:

> *He left the dog in the flat without food or water for three weeks until a neighbor heard it crying and contacted me. Not wanting animal services involved I had to go back for the dogs' sake.*

> *He sent me a video of him putting his hand over the dogs' mouth and nose to suffocate it and then threw it against the cupboard. He told me if I didn't return for good the dog would die next time, so of course I went back.*

These extracts indicate that the abusers succeeded in controlling the victims, and upon returning home, a number of victims spoke about how their companion animals were abused in order to ensure that they didn't make the same 'mistake' again:

> *One evening I was home late and he warned me if I came home late again he would hurt my new kitten. A week later I arrived home a few minutes late due to roadworks and he made me watch while he put my kitten in the dryer and put it on.*

> *He locked my dog in the shed overnight as punishment for me being home late from taking the kids to school.*

> *After my dogs killed my husband's two pigs when they escaped one evening, he 'punished me' as he calls it by beating my dogs, one to death and one to the verge of death.*

My husband came home to his budgie which had died due to illness, however in a rage he decided to blame my daughter's degus and proceeded to punish us by launching them one by one off our balcony in front of us.

Sadly, one victim who found the courage to leave the relationship learned that their pet had been killed as a consequence:

After I left, he took my dog to the vets and had it put down. This has absolutely killed me.

It is possible that perpetrators, as well as abusing animals as a practical means to control or punish their partner, may also derive pleasure from doing so: *"It frightened me the pleasure he took from scaring and overpowering the dogs."* In other extracts it is not possible to determine whether the abuser enjoyed the thrill of seeing their partner's reaction at discovering that the dog had been killed or whether they genuinely wanted to conceal their behavior: "*He killed my dog and put its body in a bag and disposed of it like rubbish in the recycling bin. I was distraught when he told me that the dog had run away until his body was found and he admitted it."*

3.3. Theme 3: Victims' Perceptions of Abusers' Behavior

The third theme identified within the data was *Victims' Perceptions of the Abusers' Behavior*. The first subtheme within this theme was *To Discipline the Animal.* One individual stated that *"*He [the perpetrator] *would say that he's teaching them."* and another stated that *"He used to beat the dog when he said that she had misbehaved. He claimed it was the only way to discipline her".* Another victim wrote *"He did it to scare and intimidate me as well as to show me what he was capable of",* which indicates that abusers are giving a message to victims that if they disobey them then they will experience similar violence. The second subtheme was *Jealousy*, in particular the abuser's jealousy of the time and attention that victims showed companion animals. Interestingly, this subtheme appears to

link to Theme 1 (The Victim-Companion Animal Bond) since victims' stories suggest that the stronger the victim-animal bond the more likely it is that the abuser will feel jealous:

> *They are jealous that they are not the sole receiver of our attention and that they have to share it with pets. If they get rid of our pets they can be central in our lives.*

> *My cats were very important to me so I turned my attention away from him which he was extremely jealous about.*

> *They are just jealous of how much love we have for our animals. It's his fault though, if he didn't call me a slut he probably would get tuna for breakfast too!*

One victim reported that she was forced to choose between her child and her pet: "*The dog was thrown out as I was only allowed to keep one; either the baby or the dog".* As a result of this jealousy, victims are often forced to find an alternative home for their pets, as one individual noted: "*Pets are used as a weapon of jealousy which leaves us no choice but to give them up".* Interestingly, some victims tried to justify the abuser's jealousy stating "*In fairness I do spoil the dog*". The third subtheme within Theme 3 was *The Abuser's Upbringing,* which was identified in a number of stories where victims often attributed an abuser's behavior to their childhood:

> *He has always had violent tendencies toward me and the dogs; his father and grandfather were similar and behaved in a violent way in their relationships which he witnessed as a child.*

> *He didn't have a good upbringing, he spent time in care and his dad was an abusive alcoholic to his mum.*

His upbringing was unstable. His mother and father went through a bad divorce after years of violence in front of him and his sister.

However, some victims suggested that their partners used their background as a way to justify their behavior: "*He uses the fact his dad was an alcoholic as an excuse for his abusive drunken behavior now", and* another victim talked about how she had tried to find out whether her partner had been previously abusive: "*I heard rumors he used to beat up his girlfriends. When I asked him about it he told me they had pushed him to it and it 'wasn't in his nature really".*

The final subtheme within Theme 3 was the *Use of Alcohol,* which a number of victims linked to their partner's abusive behavior:

He was a big drinker, definitely an alcoholic. One day he sent me out for booze and I bought the 'wrong thing'. He ordered me out to buy what he actually wanted and when I got back he stamped on my cat until she was limping and told me if I ever got the wrong booze again it would be worse next time.

He wouldn't come home after work, he would go straight to the pub and get drunk; he would then come home and physically or verbally abuse me or the dog.

These extracts present concerns victims have of their abusive partner drinking alcohol and demonstrates their awareness that it is a catalyst for abuse.

3.4. Theme 4: Support for Victims and Companion Animals

The final theme identified within the data was *Support for Victims and Companion Animals*. The first subtheme within this theme was *Police Perceiving Animal Abuse as Unimportant,* which is illustrated by the following extracts:

I felt like the police officer thought I was being dramatic.

The police officer accused me of being hypersensitive.

They just don't seem to think that animals matter.

He has made threats I believe he will follow through with but the police don't seem interested, so it's going to have to be something really serious that happens before they take notice.

The second subtheme within Theme 4 was *Lack of Services for DV Victims with Pets.* The importance of finding safety for companion animals was significant for many victims who had decided to leave an abusive relationship:

My cats were my priority when I left, forget the house and him; I needed to get my cats out.

I need to relocate my pets before I leave as escaping in the middle of the night with my pets would be difficult.

I brought my dog with me when I left as I could not leave him to suffer in my ex's hands.

One victim demonstrated awareness of the existence of shelters for DV victims, but talked about how services are lacking which enable victims to flee with their companion animals in tow: *"Why don't people who run safe places for victims realize that having pets is very reassuring, provides motivation to get up and that the unconditional cuddles we receive from our pets are invaluable?"* Unfortunately, this resulted in some victims staying in the abusive environment: "*I was too scared to leave as I couldn't take my dog with me and didn't want him to get hurt".*

However, some victims were not aware of existing services: *"When I sought refuge I left my cats behind. The refuge worker found out about pet fostering for me."* and "*Although it was too late for me, whilst in refuge a lady put her dog into pet fostering.*" In addition, some victims who were aware of such services questioned the extent to which the services met their needs: *"I contacted an organization which had occasional spaces but when I applied there were none available",* and another was surprised to learn that the shelter she contacted did not accept all types of pets: *"The animal shelters … only took dogs".*

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Summary

The current study utilized a novel method previously overlooked in the literature on companion animal abuse, which involved obtaining stories of DV victims experiences via online discussion forums. Unlike many previous studies in this area (e.g. Allen et al., 2006; Faver & Strand, 2003; Hardesty et al., 2013), DV victims in the current study were not housed in shelters, and so the findings are likely to encompass a more diverse sample of victims, including those who may not have sought shelter because they did not consider their abuse to be serious enough to warrant this, or those who were physically unable to flee the relationship. In addition, because the study collected data from a wide variety of online forums accessed by multi-users (rather than accessing victims in specific geographical localities), the findings are likely to be more generalizable to victims of DV worldwide. Furthermore, victims' experiences may have been captured in more detail since the study was not constrained by ethical problems inherent in interview and questionnaire-based studies, such as victims' experiencing feelings of shame and embarrassment, or knowing that the researcher has a duty to disclose information pertaining to an at-risk child to the relevant authorities. This latter issue may be particularly relevant for victims experiencing/witnessing more minor forms of abuse/animal abuse which have not yet been brought to the attention of the authorities.

The current study sought to explore DV victims' freely discussed experiences of companion animal abuse, including how pets were maltreated and the circumstances in which they were maltreated, victims' perceptions of perpetrators' motivations for animal abuse), whether victims discussed particular patterns of behavior, and the effect companion animal abuse had on them and other family members, including children. Four themes were identified within the data: The Victim-Companion Animal Bond; Companion Animals Used to Control Victims; Victims' Perceptions of Abusers' Behavior; and Support for Victims and Companion Animals. These themes are discussed below in relation to existing literature, and the implications of findings for policy relating to the police, DV shelters and animal welfare organizations are considered.

4.2. Discussion of themes

Theme 1 (*The Victim-Companion Animal Bond*) demonstrated that many DV victims have a strong bond with their companion animals, which is consistent with previous reports that DV victims often consider their pets to be a member of the family (Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn; 2000b; Hardesty et al., 2013; Lacroix, 1998; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Subtheme 1 within this theme (*Companion Animals Possessing Characteristics the Perpetrator Lacks*) aligns with Beck and Madresh's (2008) claim that "pets …fill a specific role by providing a consistent, and relatively controllable, sense of relationship security." (p.53); for victims who do not feel a sense of security within their relationship, companion animals appear to fulfill an important role that the abuser does not. Subtheme 2 (*Companion Animals Providing Emotional Support for Victims and Children*) supports prior research which has found that pets provide emotional support for adult DV victims and children (Beck & Madresh, 2008; McDonald et al., 2015). The stories analyzed in the current study clearly highlight the importance of pets for many children and how they witness acts of companion animal abuse. This is important because children who witness animal abuse are more likely than other children to develop emotional and behavioral problems (Girardi & Pozzulo, 2015; McDonald et al., 2016), and so professionals working with victims must consider the trauma encountered as a result of such experiences. Subtheme 4 (*Risk Taking to Protect a Companion Animal*) echos the findings of Trollinger (2001), who found that many victims postponed leaving their abuser out of fear of what would happen to their pet.

Theme 2 (*Companion Animals Used to Control Victims)* is in keeping with previous studies which have reported that companion animal abuse is often used as a form of psychological abuse to control human victims (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000a), and is consistent with feminist theories of patriarchal control and power which argue that men control women within the family home (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Subtheme 3 (*Preventing the Victim from Leaving or Coercing them to Return)* supports prior research which has found that companion animal abuse is used to control DV victims. However, this subtheme also advances our understanding of *why* companion animals are used to control human victims; some of the stories analyzed in the current study suggest that there are differences in how perpetrators abuse companion animals for the purpose of preventing the victim from leaving or coercing them to return, for example, whether they commit a series of abusive acts of increasing severity or commit one very serious or fatal act, and whether they abuse the animal in front of the victim or when the victim is not present, which may link to whether they enjoy watching the victim's reaction to the abuse or choose not to be present when the victim witnesses the consequences of the abuse. In addition, although the findings within this theme indicate that perpetrators frequently exploit the victim-companion animal bond, it is difficult to determine whether animal abuse precedes the initiation of human-directed DV or whether it follows on from human-directed DV. Furthermore, not all DV perpetrators harm animals or vice versa (Bell, 2001), and so further research is needed to investigate why some do whereas others do not. In addition, although limited research (e.g. Febres et al., 2012) has investigated animal abuse carried out by female DV perpetrators, it is not known whether the types of abuse differ to those carried out by men, and so this may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Within Theme 2, some victims reported that their partner appeared to enjoying harming their companion animals in front of them, which is consistent with Hensley and Tallichet's (2005) finding that a number of perpetrators abuse animals 'for fun'. However, other stories suggested that the abuser may have wanted to conceal their behaviour. This is interesting because such concealment of animal abuse may suggest a different motivation for animal abuse other than control (Ascione et al., 2007). It is difficult to ascertain whether animal abuse precedes or follows the initiation of DV. In cases where

an abuser has sadistic tendencies (such as in the example above where the victim describes her partner as deriving pleasure from overpowering her dogs), animal abuse may precede the initiation of DV (an abuser with a sadistic personality may begin by abusing animals and then progress onto humans in accordance with the graduation hypothesis; Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999). In other cases, an abuser may begin to abuse animals only once in an abusive relationship in order to control the victim. From this point of view, Theme 2 (*Companion Animals used to Control Victims)* appears to link to Theme 1 (*The Victim-Companion Animal Bond*); the stronger the victim-animal bond the more likely it may be that the perpetrator will abuse a companion animal to control the victim. It is possible then that different patterns of DV and animal abuse may be underpinned by different pathways.

Theme 3 (*Victims' Perceptions of Abusers' Behavior*) encompassed a number of subthemes. Subtheme 1 *(To Discipline the Animal)* parallels the theme of '*Animal maltreatment to discipline or punish the pet'* identified by McDonald et al. (2015) in their study of children's experiences of companion animal abuse. Subtheme 2 identified in the current study (*Jealousy*) may help to explain why perpetrators try to prevent victims from leaving the relationship or coerce them to return (see Theme 2, subtheme 3), and so it would be interesting to explore associations between different methods of preventing victims from leaving/coercing them to return and different attachment styles and personality attributes such as jealousy, psychopathy, callous-unemotional trait, sadism, and so forth. Specifically, future research is planned to explore whether 'subtypes' of domestic animal abuser can be identified. For example, consistent with conceptualizations of human-directed violence (e.g. Cornell, Warren, Hawk, Stafford, Oram, & Pine, 1996), the current findings suggest that there may be callous/instrumental perpetrators and reactive emotional companion animal perpetrators. Subtheme 3 (*The Abuser's Upbringing*) within Theme 3 highlighted that many victims attempted to understand their partner's behaviour by making reference to their childhood, which has been previously under-explored in this area of the literature. Consistent with research that has reported associations between substance abuse and DV (e.g. Brookoff, O'Brien, Cook, Thomson & Williams, 1997), the final subtheme (*Use of Alcohol*) encompassed a number of stories where victims talked about their partners' use of alcohol and how this often fuelled their abusive behavior.

Theme 4 (*Support for Victims and Companion Animals*) encompassed two subthemes which have implications for policy and practice relating to police training, legislation, domestic violence shelters, child protection organizations, and animal welfare organizations. Subtheme 1 (*Police Perceiving Animal Abuse as Unimportant*) is consistent with a recent inspection report published by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2014) on the police's approach to domestic violence (DV) in England and Wales, which stated that "the overall police response to victims of domestic abuse is not good enough." (p.6). It states that although DV was a priority on paper this did not always translate into operational practice and that the failings were attributable to a lack of visible leadership from senior officers, poor training and inappropriate attitudes of officers. Although the report refers to 'children' or 'child' 86 times there is not one mention of 'animals', 'companion animals' or 'pets' being victims of DV. The report states that "A proper understanding of domestic abuse, and an appreciation of the harm it causes to victims and their children, is essential if officers are to carry out effectively their core policing activities of keeping victims safe…" (p.8). Thus, changes to policy are needed if police are to perceive animal abuse in DV households as a serious issue. Police training should focus on raising awareness of the importance of animal abuse in terms of its detrimental effect on adult victims and children.

The police must also work more closely with animal welfare organizations such as the RSPCA in order to increase public awareness of animal abuse within the context of DV. Given the finding that some victims tried to justify the abuser's behavior (see Theme 3), campaigns must highlight that animal abuse can never be justified, regardless of the abuser's personality, or whether they are jealous of a companion animal, etc. Such raising of public awareness may increase the number of DV victims who report animal abuse.

One of the victim's stories analyzed in the current research revealed that they had tried to find out more about their partner from family and friends after hearing rumors that he had been previously abusive. It is therefore important that police and DV organizations ensure that victims are aware of

schemes such as the Domestic Violence Disclose Scheme (DVDS) in England and Wales which enable people to make enquiries about whether an individual they are in a relationship with have a history of abusive behavior (Greater Manchester Police, 2013). Furthermore, despite there being laws which protect the welfare of animals (such as The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales), restraining orders taken out by DV victims may not extend to companion animals and so revised legislation is needed in order to expand their limits.

Theme 4, Subtheme 2 (*Lack of Services for DV Victims with Pets*) is consistent with literature which has reported that DV victims delay seeking shelter due to a concern for their pets' welfare (e.g. Ascione et al., 2007; Flynn, 2000a; Hardesty et al., 2013; Volant et al., 2008). For example, Flynn (2000a) found that 52% of women admitted staying with their abusive partners because there was no outside care for their animals. Women's Aid (2013) estimates that 155 women and 103 children are turned away each day from the first DV shelter they approach mainly due to lack of space. Although many DV shelter administrators are aware that there is an association between DV and companion animal abuse (Komorosky, Rush-Woods & Empie, 2015), many shelters do not include intake questions about companion animals (Faver & Strand, 2003; Krienert, Walsh, Matthews, & McConkey, 2012), and most do not accommodate them because of a lack of funding, available resources, and health and safety concerns (Krienert et al., 2012). Recent recommendations have been made for how community support can be developed for DV victims and their companion animals (Komorosky et al., 2015; Long & Kulkarni, 2013), and the current findings lend support to the recommendation that DV services, animal shelters and community organizations must work together to provide joint refuge for DV victims and their companion animals. For example, DV shelters could ask all service-users about experiences of companion animal abuse and work with animal shelters to find a safe haven for pets (e.g. via the use of pet-fostering services).

Joint training initiatives are required for individuals who work in the areas of DV, child protection and animal welfare so that the links between these areas are better understood and to determine their implications for practice. Girardi and Pozzulo (2012) examined how often child protection workers

(CPWs) in Canada sought information about animal abuse during investigations of child maltreatment, and found that although the majority of CPWs witnessed animal neglect, they seldom included this in their reports. Although the authors suggest that CPWs should routinely ask children and caregivers questions about animal abuse and observe the living conditions and behavior of companion animals when conducting risk assessments, the findings of this study also indicate that CPWs would benefit from more training on the link between DV and companion animal abuse and its effects on children. This is consistent with other research which has discussed the importance of practitioners recognizing the effects that companion animals have on peoples' lives (see Williams, 2015). Finally, consistent with other studies (e.g. Hardesty et al., 2013), the current findings (see Theme 4, subtheme 2) suggest that some DV victims are not aware of services available to them and so awareness-raising of these is needed, for example by advertising services on online DV forums, nightclubs, doctor's surgeries, veterinary surgeries, etc. Ultimately, awareness of these services needs to increase so that victims -- both human and animal -- are able to live in safety.

4.3. Limitations of the study

A number of limitations with the current study must be acknowledged. First, because only publicly available information was analyzed it is possible that different themes may have been identified had other forums which required login details also been accessed. However, it is probable that similar stories would have been shared on these forums. A limitation of using anonymous forums was that demographic or other variables could not be examined (e.g. such as age or ethnicity). This meant that no statistical analyses could be conducted to explore any potential relationships between these variables and abuse. A second limitation of the study is that it was not possible to conduct any statistical analysis of the most frequently abused animals since not all stories contained this information; some individuals referred only to "my pet" or "my animals". Of those who did specify the type of animal, in the vast majority of cases these were dogs and/or cats. Thirdly, the data may not have captured the experiences of all DV victims; for example, if younger people are more likely to use the internet than older people then the findings may more strongly represent a younger generation. In addition, some DV victims may not have access to the internet (e.g. in more impoverished

countries) and some abusers may restrict or forbid use of the internet to isolate victims. A further limitation of the study is that the stories analyzed represent one-sided accounts of DV and animal abuse and so it is possible that victims may have exaggerated claims due to feelings of victimization. This, however, is also a problem for interview- and questionnaire-based studies. Finally, because the study did not provide any contact with victims it was not possible to ask follow-up questions or to examine changes over time in DV/animal abuse behaviors.

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