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Battered Women and Their Animal Companions: Symbolic Interaction Between Human and Nonhuman Animals

ABSTRACT

Only recently have sociologists considered the role of nonhuman animals in human society. The few studies undertaken of battered women and their animal companions have revealed high rates of animal abuse co-existing with domestic violence. This study examines several aspects of the relationship between humans and animals in violent homes. The study explored the role of companion animals in the abusive relationship through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with clients at a battered women's shelter. In particular, the study focused on the use of companion animals by women's violent partners to control, hurt, and intimidate the women; the responses of the animals to the women's victimization; and the role of pets as human surrogates and the resulting symbolic interaction between human and nonhuman family members. The significance of the findings for family violence research and application are discussed, as well as the broader implications for sociological investigation of human-animal interaction.

Despite decades of scholarship on battered women, violence against companion animals in abusive relationships has received virtually no scholarly attention. In fact, only two studies have examined the relationship between animal abuse and woman-battering (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b). This failure to study the **role of animals** is not limited just to family violence

scholarship. Rather, it also typifies family research, as well as sociological research in general.

It has only been in the last decade that sociologists have begun to include animals as subjects worthy of study (Alger & Alger, 1997, 1999; Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Flynn, 1999a, 1999b, 2000b; Sanders, 1993, 1999). The exclusion of animals in sociology has resulted largely from the influence of Mead (1962), who argued that animals were incapable of taking the role of the other, and thus, of symbolic interaction, because they lacked language. More recent scholars, reinforced by findings from animal research demonstrating more sophisticated cognitive, emotional, and social abilities among many species, as well as from their own ethnographic studies, are rejecting Mead's rigid dualism (Alger & Alger, 1997, 1999; Sanders, 1993, 1999).

This paper will attempt to address this oversight in two ways. First, through interviews with battered women who have companion animals, we will examine the role of animals in the violent intimate relationships. Second, and more broadly, this study endeavors to demonstrate the validity of human-animal interaction for sociological investigation.

Two major theoretical orientations are guiding this effort. To understand the relationship between violence to women (and children) and violence to animals, this analysis will draw on a feminist perspective presented by Adams (1994, 1995), which argues that patriarchy makes male violence against women and animals not only possible, but likely.

In addition, symbolic interactionism will inform the analysis of the role of animals in violent relationships. According to this perspective, individuals actively construct reality through their interactions. To interact symbolically, actors must be able to imagine how others define the situation, including how others perceive them - they must be able to take the role of the other. According to conventional sociology, because of the critical role of language in this process, symbolic interaction was not considered possible for nonhuman animals. This study, following Sanders (1993, 1999) and Alger and Alger (1997, 1999), presents evidence to challenge that notion.

Clearly, as Sanders noted in his study of dog owners, human caretakers tend to define their companion animals as "unique individuals who are minded, empathetic, reciprocating, and well aware of basic rules and roles that gov-

ern the relationship" (Sanders, 1993, p. 207). It will be argued that battered women's perceptions of their companion animals, and their relationships with companion animals, provide compelling evidence for viewing animals as minded social actors who are capable of interacting symbolically (despite their linguistic deficit) and, thus, for incorporating human-animal relationships into sociological analyses.

Roles of Companion Animals in Families

In America today, more people have pets than children. Companion animals can be found in nearly 6 out of 10 households. They are even more common in households with children - 70% of households with children under six, and 78% with children over six - have pets (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1997). Several studies have shown that, in the vast majority of homes, companion animals are regarded as members of the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Cain, 1983; Siegel, 1993).

Veevers (1985), in an analysis of the social meanings of companion animals, characterized the various roles that pets play in families according to three different functions - projective, sociability, and surrogate. The projective function concerns the pet serving as a symbolic extension of the self. The sociability function relates to the role of pets in facilitating human-to-human social interaction. The surrogate function, which is most relevant for this study, deals with pets serving as supplements or even substitutes for humans in social interaction.

Veevers posited that, while many of the surrogate roles were positive - substitute friends, mates, or children - pets could also serve as surrogate enemies. Veevers claimed that pets could be physically abused as scapegoats by other family members, that pets could be threatened or harmed to control or cause pain to another family member, and that violence against companion animals could provide a training ground for later interpersonal violence.

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist perspectives have played a significant role in understanding domestic violence, and consequently have much potential for analyzing violence

against animals, as well as the relationship between animal abuse and violence toward women and children in families. Gender, control, and violence - variables that have been central to a feminist analysis of wife abuse (Yllo, 1993) - also appear to have great promise for explaining animal abuse and the link between the two. Along these lines, for example, Adams (1995) skillfully illustrates how harming animals is part of a batterer's strategies to control and intimidate women and children in families.

According to Adams (1994, 1995), a patriarchal culture explains the violence against women, children, and animals. Consequently, violence toward animals and its relationship to domestic abuse should be viewed in that light. The disadvantaged status of women, children, and animals in a male-dominated society that has failed to take male violence seriously enables violent men to victimize members of all three groups.

Battered Women and Animal Abuse

In the family violence literature, the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence, until very recently, only had appeared secondarily, as anecdotal data (Gelles, 1988; Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992; Walker, 1979). Unfortunately, limited empirical findings have confirmed Veevers' assumptions. As family members, companion animals, like women and children, are vulnerable to abuse. The characteristics of families, including privacy and the stress associated with the high level of interdependence, can result in violence against human and nonhuman members. Anecdotal data have revealed evidence of animal abuse in studies of battered women (Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992; Walker, 1979), child abuse (Gelles & Straus, 1988), lesbian battering (Renzetti, 1992), and sibling abuse (Wiehe, 1999). Companion animals should be added to the list of so-called "hidden" victims of family violence (Gelles, 1997).

Ascione (1998) was the first to examine the pet abuse in the lives of battered women. In a study of clients at a battered women's shelter in Utah, 71% of the women with companion animals reported that their pets had been threatened, abused, or killed by a male partner. One woman in five delayed seeking shelter due to her concern for her pet's safety.

In an effort to replicate and extend Ascione's findings, I surveyed 107 clients at intake at a South Carolina shelter for battered women (Flynn, 2000b). Nearly half of the women with pets - 46.5% - reported that their partners had threatened and/or harmed their animals.

The survey data clearly revealed that their animal companions were important sources of emotional support to the women as they coped with their violent relationship. Interestingly, this was especially true if the pets had been abused. Almost 75% of all women and 90% of women whose pets were abused said that their pets were at least somewhat important as a source of emotional support. This finding suggests that the batterers may have targeted animals precisely because of the strong bond between woman and animal. In part, such behavior could occur out of jealousy. It could also occur as a cruel attempt to inflict hurt on the woman. What better way to abuse one's partner emotionally than physically to abuse an individual to whom she is close to - in this case, her companion animal?

Women continued to worry about their animal companions after coming to the shelter, particularly if their pets also had been abused. This concern was likely well founded, given that about half of the women reported that their pets were residing with their abusive partner. Twenty percent of the women with pets, and 40% of those whose pets had been harmed, said they delayed seeking shelter out of concern for their pet.

Taken together, these findings indicate that companion animals play important roles in violent relationships. The emotional attachment, the sense of worry and concern, suggest that the women, at least, view pets as family members.

The Current Study

Following the initial quantitative study of the role of pets in the lives of battered women, a smaller qualitative study was undertaken. Ten clients with companion animals from the same battered women's shelter were interviewed. With one exception, none of these women had been at the shelter during the earlier study. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded at the shelter, each lasting approximately one hour. The interviewees were

identified by the shelter director, who determined that the women had companion animals, that they were participating freely, and that their participation would not be detrimental in any way to the clients. All subjects signed informed consent forms prior to the interview. To protect their identities, the names of the women and their family members have been changed in this report.

The study focused on the following questions. First, what was the nature of the companion animal abuse? How was the animal cruelty used by the batterers to control, hurt, or intimidate their partners? Second, what was the relationship between the women and the companion animals? What role did the pets play in the lives of these women and their families? More specifically, what role did the companion animals play emotionally as abused women attempted to cope with their violent relationships? How were the pets affected by the women's victimization? Finally, what do these findings suggest about the broader study of human-animal interactions in sociology?

The Participants

The women ranged in age from 22 to 47. Two were in their twenties, four in their thirties, and four in their forties. Eight women were White, one was African American, and one was Hispanic. All were living with their batterers prior to coming to the shelter, and all but one (Ashley) were legally married to their batterers. The ages of their partners ranged from 23 to 53, and five of the men were younger than their partners. Two of the women - Mary and Jane - had been married before, and Mary was now in her third marriage. Both women had experienced pet abuse in their previous relationships, as well as in their current marriages.

With the exception of Casey, all the women were unemployed, with several on disability. Four of the women had some college education, one was a high school graduate, one had her G.E.D., and four were high school dropouts. Four of the women had husbands who were unemployed. Only Marcy, Jane, and Ashley had no (human) children. The other women had one or two children, except for Andrea, who had three, and Mary, who had five from her previous marriages.

Companion Animals as Family Members

Several studies have revealed that a majority of individuals with companion animals consider their animals to be members of their family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Cain, 1983; Siegel, 1993). The women in this study were no different. For a majority of the women, it was clear that their companion animals were more than just pets - they were regarded as children, as members of the family. In some situations, their male partners also shared this view of their animals. The women discussed their relationships with their animals with great emotion and affection. In fact, two women - Laura and Marcy like proud parents, brought photographs of their companion animals to the interview.

Some like Jane, Mary, and Ashley, spoke of their companion animals as children, as babies. Two of the women - Jane and Mary - did not have children of their own when they first got their pets. For example, Jane, speaking of her male Chihuahua, Killer, said, "He was our baby - mine and John's both - cause we don't have no children." When asked if calling Killer their "baby" meant she thought of him as a child, she replied, "He's one of the family."

Mary, who at 47 was in her third marriage, explained her close relationship with her dog Belinda, who was killed by her second husband. "I didn't have children then, so . . . I guess she was like a little child to me, you know. She rode in the car with me." And later, "My pets were my children, so to speak. They filled that void because I had lost two children and didn't have any, so, you know."

When Laura, a 36-year-old mother of two, was first asked how she thought about Sparky, her dog, it was clear she was trying to indicate his significant place in the family, while still granting higher status to her daughters. "To me, he's like . . . [long hesitation] I don't love him [Sparky] like I do my girls. I mean, nothing could take the place of my girls, but, uh, [crying] he's a close second." Later in the interview, when asked about the role Sparky plays in her life and her family's lives, she adds,

He's the most important role [sic] in our lives 'cause, um, the girls never really wanted to get together and do things, . . . and they're all right there oohin' and cooin' over him. I mean my husband made the statement, "you

would think this dog is a baby." Well he is! He's OUR baby. And he's just the center of our lives.

Being seen as children sometimes meant being seen as step-children. Andrea, now a 32-year-old mother of three, already had both a child and a dog when she met her future abusive partner. She insightfully articulated the similar ways in which her new husband [and later abuser] viewed her children and her dog.

When we were first married, it's kinda like how they act with children when they're step-children. He felt like he was a step-dog or something, I guess. He acted the same way with my kids as he did with my dog. He acted like he would do anything in the world for 'em when I first got him. He even bathed him in a hot tub at a motel we were in, and you know, just did all this stuff for him, acted like he was a great dog, and he fed him and stuff. But you could always tell, just like with the kids, there was always a source of irritation, you know, when he'd get on him or something, he'd say "Aaagh!" [groaning sound] and I could tell he, he just didn't love him like I did you know. . . . He'd say "yeah, that stupid dog of yours" and this and that. It was always "your dog," you know.

It was not only adults who included companion animals in their definition of family. Children, too, considered their pets as part of the family, as can be seen from 34-year-old Casey's account of the importance of the family's two cats to her son, Jared.

. . . The cats are very important to Jared. Yeah, Like Ms. Terri (the therapist said in therapy, when he drew his family, he drew the two cats. He will do that. He considers them . . . they are VERY important to him. I mean even when - he's real big with computers, too, and I mean, I'm not, but my little boy is. He'll get this things and you know how you register on 'em or whatever, and when he fills 'em out, he's funny. He'll put his income as \$150,000 a year. He just fills 'em out all kind of ways [daughter]. But members in your family, he'll put - he'll count the cats. He doesn't always count Pug ([dog that's half Rottweiler], but he'll count those two cats.

Unfortunately, as the family violence literature makes all too evident, being viewed as a family member also makes one vulnerable to violence from other family members. As Gelles and Straus (1979) argued, the unique characteristics of families, including privacy and interdependence, make them "violence-prone interaction settings." Further, as feminist researchers of violence against women in intimate relationships demonstrated (Yllo, 1993), the unequal relationships between men and women in families makes power and control central issues in understanding domestic violence. Given the dependent status of companion animals, their smaller physical stature, their lack of legal standing resulting from being considered property, their inability to protest against abusive treatment, the difficulty (and thus, frustration) in attempting to control them, and their emotional ties to other family members, it should come as no surprise that companion animals are often victimized by family members, especially by violent men.

Extent and Nature of Pet Abuse

Kinds of Abuse

Eight of the ten women had companion animals - all were either cats or dogs - who were threatened or abused by their male partners. Two women - Casey and Mary - had more than one animal victimized. Each had two cats and a dog who were abused.

Ashley was the only woman whose animal was threatened several times, but never physically abused. Yet threats should not be dismissed as trivial or minor. According to Ashley, age 30, her boyfriend had threatened as recently as the day before the interview to call the dog pound. On other occasions, he had reportedly said that he was going to "kill that little bastard," and had warned her that "the next time you go away you better take him or he's gonna take up missin'."

For the other seven women, their animals were not so lucky. The cats and dogs in these women's families suffered numerous and varied forms of maltreatment, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, and in one case, death. Sadly, Mary and her companion animals suffered abuse in multiple marriages.

Psychological abuse. For many animals, having to witness their human female companions being assaulted was extremely stressful. This was an indirect form of emotional abuse. A few women reported more direct forms of psychological aggression. Andrea's husband would sometimes stomp his foot in the face of Boomer, their dachshund, in order to terrify and intimidate him. Jerri's husband once shot at their dogs - and at her - and fortunately missed all of them.

Physical abuse. Unfortunately, the women's male partners committed a variety of forms of physical violence against family companion animals. Two women had cats that were abused. Casey's two cats were often "smacked" and kicked, and routinely slung off of the bed by her husband. Laura had witnessed her husband fling her cat across the room. The abused companion animals of the remaining five women were dogs. Three women, Jane, Andrea, and Karen, reported that their dogs had been kicked by their husbands. Karen's husband had kicked her chow off the porch. Boomer, Andrea's dachshund, had been kicked and flung across the room. He had also been intentionally left outside by Andrea's husband. Jerri reported that her husband hit their dogs fairly frequently, and fed them gunpowder in order to "make 'em mean."

The worst abuse, by far, was suffered by Mary's companion animals over the course of three marriages. All three husbands had physically abused various companion animals, and her first two husbands had each sexually abused Belinda, her Boston terrier. Her current husband has abused their cat, by throwing her and by backhanding her off of the table.

Her second husband intentionally ran over Belinda on his motorcycle, and then buried her alive. Later, according to Mary, he sacrificed Belinda as part of a satanic ritual. She also had a Doberman named Hans who was beaten up by her husband. In one horrible incident, her husband became enraged when both Hans and Belinda tried to intervene while he was assaulting Mary. To retaliate, he tried to hang Belinda by tying a clothesline wire around her neck, nearly choking her to death. Mary had to cut her down to free her.

Interpreting Males' Animal Abuse - Intentions and Effects

Power and control. According to Adams (1995), male batterers abuse animals as part of their deliberate strategies to control their female partners. Adams identifies nine reasons why men harm and kill companion animals. Through animal cruelty, men:

- a) demonstrate their power;
- b) teach submission;
- c) isolate the woman from a network of support and relationship;
- d) express rage at self-determined action by women and children;
- e) perpetuate the context of terror;
- f) launch a preemptive strike against a woman leaving;
- g) punish and terrorize by stalking and executing an animal;
- h) force her to be involved in the abuse; and
- i) confirm their power.

"Each of these reasons for harming a pet reveals motives of aggrandizing or regaining one's power" (Adams, 1995, p. 73).

Although not all these reasons surfaced in the current study, it became clear that controlling these women by hurting, terrorizing, and intimidating them was a primary purpose of males' animal abuse. As we have already noted, Veevers pointed out this function of companion animals, and DeViney et al. (1983) refer to this process as "triangling." Andrea recognized this motive for her husband's abuse of Boomer, saying "... I think he uses the dog big time to hurt us. ..."

Laura recounted the time her husband "picked the cat up and slung it across the room" because "he knew it would hurt me to see my cat fall." Jerri believed that her husband knew that he was hurting her and her son when he was hurting their dog. When asked if her husband would sometimes hit the dogs to try to show her who was boss, she replied, "He say [sic] he control me and the dogs and little Maurice, too."

A partner's attempts to control and hurt them (and sometimes their children) through their animals indicated that their pets may have been seen by the men as extensions of the women. Andrea stated this directly, saying "So,

yeah, I mean and it was like an extension of me, you know? And you know, maybe he abused the dog cause he couldn't, didn't want to go to jail for abusing me, I guess."

In other words, pets may have served as scapegoats. Andrea felt her husband "used the dog instead of us . . . as his punching bag." She went on to say that her husband

would sometimes do to Boomer what he wished he could do to us, and you know, like using the dog as a scapegoat, and, because there was plenty of times that we were in the middle of a huge fight and Boomer would just get in the way - just get in the way accidentally. He'd swat at him, kick him, or he'd go like this with his boot, you know, stomp it really loud, you know, right next to Boomer's face so that Boomer would run, you know. And the dog didn't even do anything, so I really felt like he was tryin' to intimidate the dog as much as he would try and intimidate the family, you know? So, in essence I guess he treated, uh, the dog just like family, too. That's how he treated the family.

Some of the women felt that their husbands' jealousy of the relationship the women had with the animals had contributed to the pet abuse. Casey, talking about her husband, said, "And he's even accused me of treatin' the cats better than him." And later, she reported him saying, "'You think more of them cats than you do me,' which is true, yeah," she added.

Mary also felt jealousy played a role in her pet's abuse. She explained that after Hans, who was her husband's dog, got hit by a car, she took care of it.

A: And so the dog and I got very, very close. . . . I think he was very jealous of that.

Q: So he might have been jealous of your relationship?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Do you think that then - that that was a way to punish you, by punishing the dog?

A: It might have been.

Overall, the batterers' attempts to dominate and control the women through their pets illustrated the larger role of traditional gender role stereotypes held

by these men. More than one woman spoke of her partner's beliefs in male dominance. Karen indicated that her husband believed that he, and men in general, were the head of the household, and should be in charge. She felt like he believed that "he was supposed to have all control and supposed to know every dime, where it went and decide where it went. Not KNOW where it went; DECIDE where it went."

Ashley expressed similar sentiment about her boyfriend. "He just thinks he's supposed to be the boss. He wants to control me. He says I'm supposed to stay home while he goes out all day ramblin' around."

In some cases, as with wife abuse, it may have been the men's failure to live up to masculine expectations, especially with regard to providing for their families, that contributed to the pet abuse. Of the four men who were unemployed, all were abusive to their companion animals.

In at least one case, experiences with animals may have served to heighten traditionally masculine expressions of dominance and aggression. Karen insightfully connected her husband's violence with the aggressive animals he has had - including a Doberman, a pit bull/boxer mix, and snakes - both growing up and as an adult.

But sittin' from where I'm sittin' and lookin' back on everything [hesitation], the animals that Greg had when I met him [hesitation], were mean, ferocious, and scary animals, and they went to bigger animals but calmer animals, meaning Doberman to the horse. You know, it's bigger but it's nowhere near as vicious so to speak. He had snakes when I first met him. . . . Now his pit bull, the pit bull boxer, it was a mixed-breed dog, he had it at the same time that he had the Doberman. And they were in his parents' backyard, and when it came to feedin' time in that house, they were both on chains and it was all him and his daddy could do - and his daddy's a big man - it was all they could do with hoe handles and rake handles to keep them dogs from tearin' each other apart come feedin' time.

When asked if she saw any connection between her husband having aggressive dogs and his aggression toward her, Karen replied, "When he had those aggressive dogs, he was more aggressive to me as opposed to when he had the horse and, he wasn't as physically abusive. It didn't feel like he hit as

hard either. You know [long hesitation]. Of course, maybe that was just 'cause I was gettin' immune to the pain."

Effects on children. Of the eight women whose pets were abused, seven had children. Four women - Jerri, Andrea, Jane, and Casey - reported that their children had witnessed their companion animals' victimization. Like their mothers, the children were both angered and terrified by their fathers' or stepfathers' cruelty toward their beloved companion animals. Casey describes her son Jared's reaction when his stepfather kicked their cat, Trouble, across the room.

He [Jared] just looked at me like, you know, "please don't let . . ." He didn't say anything. He just looked at me like, "please don't let him do my cat that way!" And he just stood there in fear like he wanted to go get his cat but, you know, we were all headed out the door, and he just kind of stood there in fear, and I said something to Steve and he said, "Well, he [Trouble] don't need to go outside. I won't never catch him to get him back in!"

Andrea's children witnessed her husband abuse Boomer, their dachshund. She said that it "upset both of them, but especially Shawn. . . ." When asked if her sons ever tried to protect Boomer from her husband, Richard, she responded,

And the kids most of the time were afraid of Richard, so they never got in the way. They would, Shawn would just be quiet about it and give Richard dirty looks, you know. But when he'd go out and Richard would sometimes say, "don't go out and get him, don't call him. Let him come, he'll come home when he wants to." So Richard wouldn't even want Shawn to go out and cuddle him because, that's what he called it, because, you know, [Richard] would say things like "he [Boomer] was bad. You need to let him just be out there by himself. If he gets run over or whatever, it's HIS fault or it's HIS problem!"

How were Andrea's children affected by Richard's maltreatment of Boomer?

I think it affected them the same way it affected them when they saw Richard be abusive to us, you know, is that, you know, here's someone we love, you know, is a part of our family to us, just like one of my children, that dog

is. I've had him for a long time and he's part of my family. And, um, same for the boys. They LOVE that dog, and for them to see it, you know, it's hurtful and then to know they can't protect him because Richard's bigger and stronger, and um, you don't want him to do that to YOU, you know, and it's kinda like . . . [long hesitation]. So, I mean, they were just kinda stuck, yeah. I think it affected them a lot.

So children were also victimized by the abuse of the companion animals, in ways that often parallel the effects of wife abuse on children. Not only was a loved one, a valued member of the family being harmed, but they were powerless to do anything about it at the time, and often prevented from comforting the animal immediately following the abuse. In general, the abuse contributed to a climate of control, intimidation, and terror for children, women, and animals.

Animals' Responses to Women's Victimization

Comforters

It was clear from the interviews that, because of their close relationship with their companion animals, the animals were very important emotionally to the women following a violent episode. Some indicated that their pets could sense that something was wrong, and that, as a result, they provided comfort and unconditional love.

For Andrea, having her dachshund Boomer around after she had been assaulted was like having her children there. ". . . Same as my kids, you know, it's like having them around just makes you know that everything is okay, you know. No matter what, you're gonna be all right."

Jane, whose pets were abused by both her first and current husbands, said that "a lot of times after me and Stanley [first husband] got into it, I'd go out in the yard and, where we had the dogs at, they all come and crawl up and sit beside me and put their head in my lap like they knowed somethin' was wrong, you know." Later, she said, "You know, they make me feel like [hesitation] I was needed for somethin' anyway." Laura also believed that Sparky, her Shitsu, knew when she was feeling bad.

I've had a cat with his personality, but never a dog. Like when I feel bad, he can tell, at twelve weeks, he can already tell you know: "Well, she's feelin' bad - let me love on her." He'll just come up to me and nudge my foot tryin' to get up on top of me or jump up on the furniture I'm on and whimper and whine 'til I pick him up, and then I can pick him up, and he'll just get up on my chest and lay there, like, "I'm gonna make it better, Mama."

Talking with their companion animals following an argument or a battering incident was comforting to these women. Brenda, when asked if she ever talked to Mutt, her chow, after being hit by her husband replied,

Oh yeah, he's there for me. If we get into an argument, I'll go outside and sit there because there's like, when he chops the wood, there's like a bench you can sit on. It's right next to Mutt and I'll sit there, and then Mutt will just come and sit next to me with his chain cause he's strong enough. He'll sit there and he'll look at me like, "What's wrong?" And I'll start talkin' to him and he's like, "It's okay." And he'll lay his little head right here on my lap and I'll start pettin' him. And he'll look at me like, "Ah, that feels so good."

As many who share lives with companion animals have attested, one of the major rewards for the women is the unconditional love that animals bestow upon them. Jane described a night when her current husband had been, in her words, in "one of his foul moods." Her Chihuahua, Killer, got up in her lap and began to lick her. "I said, 'You love mama whether anybody else does or not, don't ya, Killer?' And he'd just whine, you know. And then he curled up and laid down right here like a baby would, on my chest and went to sleep."

Unfortunately, there were times when some women were unable to be with their pet following an abusive episode, because the animal was terrified and in hiding. When Andrea was asked about whether Boomer, her dachshund, was ever a source of comfort and support after an incident, she said, "Well, sometimes I, I would have liked to have him been, but he was so afraid that he wouldn't come out." Later, she acknowledged that Boomer was "very, very important to me when he was around. When I couldn't get him to come out because he was too scared, then I didn't have that comfort, but yeah, he was very comforting to me."

Protectors

It was not at all unusual for an animal to attempt to protect a woman when she was being abused. Mary, Laura, Ashley, and Andrea all reported protective responses from their animals. Laura reported that her Himalayan cat, Gizmo, once tried to get to her husband.

Eddie hit me and that cat jumped at Eddie. [Long hesitation] The only cat I know of that had ever protected its master. Cause, um, when he jumped, I grabbed him 'cause I knew Eddie would kill him. And, uh, he wouldn't let Eddie around me for like four or five hours. I'd get up and go to the kitchen and he'd be on my heels.

Ashley recounts how Darlene, her golden retriever mix, responded to her husband's physical taunts.

I'd be sittin' in the left front room next to the front door, and he'd come by me going to the bathroom or whatever and he'd slap me on the head - just, not hard enough to hurt me, but hard enough to annoy me. And Darlene, the little retriever mix, she, every time he stands there for a moment, she gets up on him pushing him away, or crawls up in my lap where he can't get to me. She won't let, doesn't want him to come too close to me. [And later] ... Well, like I said, when he comes near that chair, talkin' or anything, she gets right between us, and then if he gets too close, she jumps up and pushes him away. She comes up to here, to my breasts, with her paws on her hind legs, and 60 pounds ain't nothin' to shake a stick at! [laughter]. She can make you move!

On a few occasions, Boomer tried to protect Andrea from her husband by snarling and barking at him. But her husband would slap at Boomer, causing him to flee the scene, making him unavailable to give or receive emotional support. Sometimes an animal's attempt to intervene in a battering episode led to the animal's victimization. Mary's dog, Belinda, tried to defend Mary during an assault by her second husband and was nearly killed.

Emotional Responses to Witnessing Women's Abuse

Whether or not they were trying to protect her, witnessing a woman's abuse was often very emotionally upsetting for her animal companion. Similar to

symptoms of stress in humans, women reported several physical manifestations of stress in their pets when the animals witnessed her abuse, including shivering or shaking, cowering, hiding, and urinating. In the only violent episode after acquiring Sparky, Laura believed he was affected by observing it.

He would just shy away and wouldn't come to us. It took him about 30 minutes for him to come to me, which I'm always the first one he'll go to anyway, and it took him 30 minutes. I don't know whether he just decided he wasn't afraid or, you know, sensed that I was upset and came to me because of it, but [brief hesitation] he shied away. He stayed up under the chair. Even got a "Beggin' strip" out and he didn't want it, and that's not like Sparky - his popcorn and his "Beggin Strips."

Sometimes just shouting by the batterer was troubling to the animals. "Well, he claims he couldn't love a child as much as he loves Darlene [golden retriever mix]," Ashley explains, "but when he raises his voice and carrying on like a lunatic, it upsets Darlene, and I keep tellin' him, 'lower your voice - you're upsetting Darlene! Don't yell like that!' He'll say, 'I don't give a damn' and just keeps on."

Andrea reported similar stressful responses by Boomer, her dachshund, to angry yelling by her husband.

... Whenever, Richard would start yellin', Boomer would hide, you know, under the bed or under the table or wherever, and sometimes you know, pee all over when he was yelling because he knew that Richard was mad and thought maybe he was gonna get it or whatever, or one of us or whatever, and he would pee everywhere.

Q: So you think it was from stress of anxiety that he would do something like that?

Oh yeah, because, I mean he's like a lot of dogs that do that, you know, cause if you were, if he thought you were mad at him and you went to pick him up, even if you weren't but if he thought you were, he'd pee, you know. And most little dogs do that, but he would do it when Richard would come after him every time, you know, because he knew that, you know, Richard didn't play around, you know, that he was REALLY mad, and he usually

thought right. He'd make the mistake with me sometimes, but he always knew Richard was mad.

Thus even just by yelling at his partner, he inflicts multiple forms of psychological damage on both woman and animal. The verbal abuse hurts her directly, but it also upsets her animal companion. And that victimizes her in yet another way.

Jerri identified the mutual nature of harm with regard to violence in her relationship. She understood that when her husband abused her dogs, he was hurting her and their son, as well. But she also understood that his violence toward them was harmful for the dogs to witness. . . . When he'd be hurtin' us, he'd be hurtin' the dogs, too, cause they'd sit there and look, you know, like they're sayin', 'why he jumpin' on them - they ain't did nothin.' They'd be actually barkin' at him and stuff."

After an abusive episode, Ashley describes trying to calm down Darlene, who "panics. She actually starts shivering." When asked if you could really see the physical reaction, Ashley replied, "Uh-huh. She comes up and lays across me and a 60-pound dog does not belong in you lap, and she sits there and curls up to me, and I get her big head in my hands and I just rub her and talk real softly to her and she calms down, but he just keeps yackin' and yackin' at the top of his voice."

These examples reveal an interesting dimension to domestic violence involving companion animals. It is important to see that both women and animals are victimized. On the one hand, animals are harmed emotionally when they observe their human female companions abused. On the other hand, women are simultaneously emotionally victimized, as they are forced to worry about the animal's well-being, both in the midst of and immediately following, a violent episode.

Leaving Companion Animals Behind

Delayed Leaving Due to Animals

Earlier studies of shelter women have found that about one-fifth of women delayed coming to the shelter out of concern for the welfare of their companion animals (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b). Such delays mean that both

women and animals remain at risk for additional abuse. Among this sample, four women - Andrea, Ashley, Laura, and Casey - indicated that they delayed leaving their batterers because they were worried about their pets. For example, Laura said that she "found out about this place [the shelter], but, um, I couldn't leave Sparky 'cause I was afraid he'd kill her. So, soon as I found Sparky somewhere to stay, I came." Andrea echoed those feelings, saying, "Yeah, I might have left sooner if I would have had a place for him [Boomer] to go - probably would've left quite a while sooner."

Ashley said she would have come one month sooner if not for her concern about what would happen to Scooter and Darlene. Casey delayed even longer, waiting about two months before leaving her abuser. Casey explained, "Steve is not the kind of guy you can just leave. He'll hunt you down. You can't just leave him. You gonna have to go to the Safe Homes. And see, I started callin' here in January and February - several weeks ago, but the cats, I just didn't know what to do with the cats, or I would've been in here. If I didn't have those animals, I would've been here."

Each of these women spoke about how they wished that the shelter could somehow accommodate their animals. Andrea, who fortunately had found someone to care for Boomer while she was at the shelter, talked about how "great" it would be if the shelter had a place for pets.

Even something like that, you know, um, that would be great, where the people could go outside and visit with their animals or take them out in the dog room or somethin' you know. I mean, they've got the room here. It would be awesome if they did that because I know a lot of people, I mean, so many people here. We've talked about it since we did the survey thing [my earlier research project], and a lot of us have said how, you know. There's a lady down there . . . that would really appreciate having a place like this. I mean, this is a great place anyway, but it would be a greater place, you know, if people could bring their pets. It would really help.

When asked if she would have brought Scooter and Darlene if the shelter had accepted pets, Ashley said, "Oh yeah, even if I had to bring a mop and my own broom and cleaning solution. I'd a brought 'em." Laura expressed similar sentiments, saying, "If they tell me I could bring my dog, I'd walk [and get him]."

The women also miss the emotional support of their companion animals during this very difficult time in their lives. Laura put it this way: "To me, they ought to let us bring our pets because that's the one thing we could get the help from. When nobody else wants a hug or wants to be around you, they don't care. Just love 'em and feed 'em."

Miss, Worry About Animals

Having to leave their companion animals behind is extremely upsetting for most of these women. Since the women tended to view their pets as children, as family members, it is easy to understand their worry and concern. Some women were lucky enough to find caretakers for their animals. An elder in Andrea's church volunteered to keep Boomer for her. Laura had a friend who was willing to provide a temporary home to Sparky. Karen's cat, Sammy, was living at their old house, which has since been abandoned by Karen's husband.

The companion animals of Casey, Jane, and Ashley, however, were still with their (both the women's and the animals') abusers. This caused a great deal of concern for a variety of reasons. Ashley was worried that her husband might not be feeding her animals what they should be eating. But beyond that, she was also receiving threats that he might take Darlene, their golden retriever mix, away from her. Such concerns demonstrate how companion animals can be used by batterers to control, hurt, and manipulate women even after they have left home.

Ashley's account of this struggle sounded like divorcing parents in a custody fight. She was considering letting her husband visit her dogs, especially Darlene, because she believed that was important for both of them.

Well, in a way it is [like a custody battle] because we both been [sic] with her since she was just a baby. And just like, 'cause I was kept from my father, I mean I'm very against that idea unless it's harmful. . . . Like I said [hesitation], I don't trust him any more. He would probably try to get her sent somewhere where I couldn't get her back. So I am thinking about changing my mind about that! Letting him see her when he wants to.

Interestingly, in the case of Jane and Ashley, it appears that the main reason that their pets had remained with the male batterers was that the batterers had developed relationships with the animals that the women were trying to respect and that led them to be less concerned about future abuse. This may be due to the fact that the prior animal abuse was not as frequent or severe as in some of the other relationships.

On the other hand, Andrea and Laura “knew” their husbands would hurt their animals, and that knowledge led them to “foster” their pets before coming to the shelter. According to Andrea, “I KNOW Richard would’ve done something to him because he’s just, he was just SO mad that I knew something would happen if I wasn’t careful. So, I was really, really worried. I almost didn’t leave until the next day because I didn’t know what to do with him. . . .” Later in the interview, she explained why she was convinced her husband would have harmed Boomer if she had left him there.

Oh, yeah, I don’t think he would have killed him or anything, but I think he would have abused him. I think he would have hit him and kicked at him and whatever, you know. Yeah, I definitely think so. Maybe not right away, but whenever he got mad, you know, he thought about it and got mad, you know, maybe thought about us leaving or whatever and , “hey, you stupid dog - you’re still here!” I can just see him because he’s like that. He’s very verbal and nasty, you know, he wouldn’t hesitate to be that way with the dog, so, yeah, I think he would have hurt him if I would have left him there.

But knowing that Boomer was now safe didn’t cause all of the worrying to stop. Among other things, Andrea was still worried that Boomer may have picked up bad habits, or was being spoiled, or that his “foster parents” may be becoming attached to Boomer and wouldn’t want to give him back.

Because the women missed their animal family members terribly, they often made great efforts to check on and sometimes visit their companions. Laura said that she checked on Sparky every day. Andrea, who was planning to take her children to visit Boomer soon, had different kinds of worries about visiting Boomer.

Yeah, the kids want to go see him. I’m just afraid when I go see him that I won’t be able to leave him, you know, or that he’s going to want to come

with me and try to hop in my car, and I would be really, really upset. It's almost like it's better not seein' him because I'm imagining him running around and being happy and, you know, and then to see him, I KNOW he's going to be upset when I leave, and I don't know if it's better for him to see me or better for him to NOT see me and then not miss me while I'm gone, you know, but the kids really want to see him so we'll probably drive out there fairly soon and visit with him.

Including Animals in Future Plans

The importance of companion animals in the women's lives is highlighted by their efforts to incorporate the animals into their plans for the future. Andrea, Karen, and Casey all talked about wanting to find a place to live where they could have pets. Yet they worried about whether they would be successful, given that many apartment complexes either do not allow pets, or if they do, impose additional charges, such as pet deposits and/or higher rents. Andrea expressed her concerns this way, when asked if she hoped to find some place to live where she could bring Boomer:

Yeah, I'm hopin' that. I'm actually kind of doubtful that I will. . . . You know, I looked at two apartments that had pet deposits, which I wouldn't be able to afford a pet deposit. And, um, DSS (Department of Social Services) or whoever helps you out with rent and all that, they're not gonna pay a pet deposit for you, and I can't come up with an \$250. I mean, I'm gonna be short as it is.

So, even after the women, their children, and their animals are safe, many women still fear losing their valued animal companions when they begin rebuilding their lives following their abusive relationships.

Discussion

Interviews with battered women who have companion animals provide support for the gendered nature of violence in families, and reveal the symbolic role of pets in families, and the symbolic interaction between humans and animals. There was little doubt that, for the most part, these women considered their companion animals to be members of the family, referring to them

as their children, their "babies." Unfortunately, the domestic violence literature in general, and feminist scholarship in particular, make it clear that weaker, less powerful members of families - women and children - are at risk of being assaulted by stronger, more powerful members - men. Now companion animals can be added to the list of potential victims of male violence in intimate relationships.

Men employed many forms of abuse, including threatening to harm or give away beloved companion animals, hitting, kicking, beating, choking, and in one case, even killing them. Often this animal abuse was used to control, hurt, or intimidate their female partners, and sometimes, their children. This harm to their animal companions added to the stress and terror they were already experiencing as victims of domestic violence themselves.

Men's use of violence against their partners' companion animals is consistent with feminist explanations that have stressed the role of patriarchy and the connection between gender, power, and control in understanding violence in intimate relationships (Yllo, 1993). The work of Adams (1994, 1995) extends this analysis to include animals along with women and children among the victims of male violence.

If companion animals are thought of as family members, and if women and animals are both targets of abuse, then each may turn to the other for comfort and support, and even protection, during and after a battering episode. In addition, both women and animals are victimized by violence toward the other. A man's violence toward an animal also hurts his partner (and children), just as his violence toward her also hurts the animal (Adams, 1995). These interviews help shed light on the multidimensional nature of domestic violence.

Concern for the safety and welfare of their pets led some women to delay leaving their batterers, one by as much as two months. Even after leaving they continued to worry about their animals, check on them frequently, and visit them whenever possible. If at all possible, women were committed to finding a place to live after leaving the shelter that would allow them to have all members of their family living with them - including their nonhuman members.

Given the significant role that animals play in the lives of some battered women, it becomes critical for professionals who serve them to be aware of

and acknowledge the importance of women's relationships with their pets (Flynn, 2000a). Shelter staff need to inquire about companion animals at intake, and take seriously women's emotional turmoil related to missing and worrying about their animals. Previous research by Ascione, Weber, and Wood (1997b) has shown that although shelter staff are often aware of animal abuse in their clients' families, typically by their batterers, few shelters actually provided services related to this issue. Shelters could develop foster programs that could provide temporary homes for clients' pets, or better yet, create animal housing facilities on site (Arkow, 1996). Perhaps the local animal shelter could house women's animals while they were in the shelter. Providing a foster home for pets becomes particularly important considering that some women delay coming to the shelter since they cannot bring their animals with them.

Provisions should be made for women to check on their animals, both for the sake of the animals and the women. Prior research has found that pets of battered women have received lower levels of regular and emergency veterinary care than animals of nonabused women (Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997a). Shelters could establish arrangements with veterinarians whereby medical services for their animals could be performed either free of charge or for a reduced fee (Arkow, 1996).

Clinicians need to respect the relationship women have with their companion animals. Counselors need to understand that another family member has been left behind, one who may be at risk for abuse and/or neglect, and that both woman and animal are likely to be suffering as a result of their separation. Finally, when shelter staff help their clients prepare to leave the shelter, they should make every effort to help find housing for the women where their pets are also welcome.

Battered Women, Companion Animals, And Symbolic Interaction

At least two of the three roles or functions of companion animals identified by Veevers (1985) are illustrated in this study. The most obvious is the surrogate role, in which pets supplement or substitute for human-human interaction. Companion animals were thought of as children for the women (and sometimes for their partners). Beyond that, many women thought of their pets as

friends and as confidants. For their batterers, the animals often served as enemies - either as scapegoats, or as targets of abuse directed at their partners.

There is also evidence that animals served a projective function for some of the men. For example, Karen's husband, who held traditional gender role attitudes, projected a macho persona through his stereotypically aggressive dogs.

In addition to the symbolic roles or meanings of companion animals in these relationships, there is compelling evidence that the relationships between the women and their companion animals are not one-way interactions. Rather, the nature of these human-animal relationships suggests that animals are indeed capable of creating shared definitions of the situation with their human companions, of taking the role of the other, and thus, of engaging in symbolic interaction.

This conclusion fits with earlier studies of human-animal interaction by Sanders (1993) and Alger and Alger (1997), who reject Mead's human/animal dichotomy which renders animals incapable of symbolic interaction due to their lack of language. Like the animals in these prior studies, the animals in the current study were seen as minded individuals by their human companions. Further, the animals were perceived by the women to be emotional beings who were not only capable of expressing emotion, but were attuned to the women's emotional states. The pets often initiated interactions, sensing that they were needed after a violent episode. At other times, some animals attempted to protect women during an assault. In addition, pets were clearly stressed emotionally when their human friends had been abused.

All these responses indicate that the companion animals were minded social actors who had created shared definitions with the women in their lives, and responded to those definitions with mutuality and intentionality. In short, these animals were capable of taking the role of the other, and thus, of symbolic interaction. As Alger and Alger (1997) have said, Thus the evidence of our study, as well as the studies of others, strongly suggests that far from being a human attribute, symbolic interaction is a widely distributed ability throughout the animal kingdom enabling animals to survive more effectively in a large variety of environments. (p. 80)

Such a conclusion has profound implications for sociological study of human-animal relationships. If animals are capable of symbolic interaction, then not only are human-animal relationships worthy of empirical investigation, but animals are social beings deserving of moral consideration. It will be interesting to see if sociology, which as a discipline has exposed and fought against social inequality based on gender, class, or race, will accept this challenge to end speciesism, and include animals in its sphere of study.

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Note

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