



ABUSE AND THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

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April 11, 2013



Introduction

- ◆ One-half to three-fourths of women who have fallen victim to domestic violence, have also reported that their companion animal(s) had been threatened, harmed or even killed by their abuser.
- ◆ An estimated 71.4 million families or 62% of all families in the United States, own one or more companion animals.
- ◆ The percentage of women who own companion animals in domestically violent households, is even higher than the national average.

Problem

- Despite the prevalence of pet ownership among women who have fallen victim to domestic violence and the quantitative and qualitative data supporting the correlation between domestic violence and animal abuse, there is a lack of research addressing the significance of the human-animal bond that forms between the victims (both human and non-human) of the perpetrated abuse.



Research Focus

- ◆ The role of the human-animal bond
- ◆ The psychological and physiological affects this bond can have for women in DV situations
- ◆ Correlation between the “perceived importance” of the human-animal bond and co-occurring abuse
- ◆ The detrimental affects of an abrupt end of the human-animal bond in DV situations



Additional Areas of Discussion

- ◆ Link between social work and animal abuse
- ◆ Research challenges
- ◆ Possible solutions



Role of the Human-Animal Bond

- Veevers theoretical model- Argues that companion animals play one of three roles within a family structure:
 - Projective Function
 - Sociability Function
 - Surrogate Function





The Surrogate Role



- Companion animals take on both positive and negative roles within households riddled with domestic violence.
- ★ **Positive Role:** Emotional support for battered women who are often isolated or denied opportunities to interact with the “out side world” by their abuser.
- ★ **Negative Role:** May be viewed as “surrogate enemies,” as they can become an additional source for batterers to inflict emotional abuse and control.

Physiological Effects of Domestic Violence

- ◆ Chronic pain (i.e. headaches and back pain) and recurring central nervous system symptoms such as fainting and seizures.
- ◆ Battered women are more likely to have been injured in the head, face, neck, breasts, and abdomen.
- ◆ Cardiac symptoms such as hypertension and chest pain
- ◆ Suppression of the immune system



Physiological Benefits of the Human-Animal Bond



- ◆ Decrease cardiovascular effects of stress more effectively than the presence of a friend or spouse.
- ◆ Increased Immunoglobulin A (IgA), a type immunoglobulin that is present in the mucous membranes of the body such as tears saliva and blood, and is responsible for assisting the body in fighting infections





Physiological Benefits Cnt...

- ◆ Lower Blood Pressure and cholesterol levels
- ◆ Increase neurochemicals in the body that have been associated with relaxation, bonding and improved immune system functioning.
- ◆ Increase levels of the release of the peptide hormone oxytocin (OT).
 - ◆ Anti-stress component, as it decreases glucocorticoid (a stress hormone) levels in both humans and animals, particularly during stressful situations.

Psychological Effects of Domestic Violence

◆ Domestic violence victims experience a wide range of psychological issues such as:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Substance abuse
- Eating disorders
- Suicidal thoughts
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



◆ It is estimated that an average of 64% of battered women meet the DSM criteria for PTSD.

Psychological Benefits of the Human-Animal Bond

- ◆ Assist with ones ability to sooth and calm themselves during symptomatic episodes of PTSD.
- ◆ Increased feelings of acceptance
- ◆ Reduce anxiety and depression
- ◆ Provides a consistent and reliable relationship



Correlation Between the Perceived Importance and Co-Occurring Abuse

- ◆ In households where women viewed their pets as an important source of emotional support, there were also higher rates of abuse towards their companion animals by the abuser, in comparison to women who did not view their companion animal(s) as an important source of emotional support.



Correlation Between the Perceived Importance and Co-Occurring Abuse Cnt...

- ◆ Women who viewed their companion animals as an important source of emotional support were less likely to have children.
- ◆ 64% of battered women who did not have children described their pets as playing an important emotional role within their lives, whereas, only 37% of women with children made the same





Detrimental Affects of an Abrupt Separation

- ◆ Fleeing to a shelter means temporary or permanent separation from their companion animal(s). The emotional support that existed between human-animal victims ceases to exist
- ◆ Women are forced to endure the loss of their companion animals, often the sole source of emotional support
- ◆ Women experience strong feelings of guilt and anxiety, feeling as though they have let their companion animal(s) down in some way
- ◆ Increased levels of PTSD, no longer have their companion animals to mitigate these symptoms.



Link between Social Work and Animal Abuse

- ◆ Animal cruelty can be a marker of family violence
- ◆ Evidence of animal cruelty could be used to enhance the chances of securing an order of protection, temporary custody, or even the arrest of a batterer.
- ◆ Increased criminology in animal abuse cases can also play an important role in addressing domestic violence issues as well.

Challenges of this Research

- ◆ Lack of empirical data, due to the fact that abuse victims are a difficult population to reach
- ◆ Very few domestic violence shelters systematically assess for the ownership of companion animals or companion animal abuse
 - ◆ Findings of Ascione, Weber, and Wood's domestic violence shelter Survey
- ◆ Most research studies were confined to shelter settings, not necessarily representative of overall DV population



Possible Solutions



- ◆ Increased cross-training and cross-referrals between animal protection personnel and social service agency professionals
- ◆ Increase questions about companion animals and abuse during shelter intake process
- ◆ Collaboration between service providers, animal welfare agencies and veterinarians to develop “safe haven” programs to care for the pets of women who have no alternative place for their animals. Such programs remove an important barrier to women’s ability to leave their batterers.



Conclusion

- ◆ There is an undeniable link between domestic violence and animal abuse.
- ◆ Within the domestic violence realm, companion animals often take on the Surrogate Function in their human companions lives.
- ◆ Various physiological and psychological benefits for women in DV situations
- ◆ The perceived importance of the human-animal bond is directly correlated to the likelihood of co-occurring abuse
- ◆ The psychological support companion animals can provide for women fleeing a DV situations can be monumental. However, it is a crucial time that separation takes place



Questions



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