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Companion Animals and Domestic Violence

Rescuing Me, Rescuing You

Nik Taylor · Heather Fraser

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Because other species make up the economic, sociological, emotional, and moral fabric of society, they play important roles in countless social problems. Some criminal activities have connections to animal abuse and fighting. Income inequality and discrimination have historically influenced pet prohibitions in rental housing by disproportionately affecting residents with low incomes. Confined livestock operations, animal hoarding, dog bites, and zoonotic disease transmission have public health and environmental implications. Wildlife poaching and the illegal traffic in endangered species threaten conservation efforts and defy international law. Because animals lack voices and social power, they cannot attract attention to the social problems that involve them. Incorporating animals into the study of social problems provides a clearer understanding of what groups and individuals consider problematic, how problems emerge on the social landscape, and what solutions might address them. This series transforms the scholarly analysis of social problems by focusing on how animals contribute to and suffer from issues long considered uniquely human. For further information on the series and submitting your work, please get in touch with Leslie Irvine (University of Colorado Boulder, USA) at Leslie.Irvine@Colorado.edu.

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Palgrave Studies in Animals and Social Problems
ISBN 978-3-030-04124-3 ISBN 978-3-030-04125-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04125-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018963558

Cover illustration: © fabio camandona / Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

This book is dedicated to all victims/survivors of domestic violence—irrespective of species.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants of the studies that informed this book. For the *Loving You* project, this includes the women and their animal companions who greeted us so warmly when we visited them at home—Julie Felus and Carley Milich from the Northern Domestic Violence Service in South Australia; and Celine Graham from Relationships Australia (SA, North). Special recognition needs to go to Julie Felus for creating pet-friendly women's refuge possibilities over the last decade. We would also like to acknowledge Damien Riggs, our friend and colleague, who was a key part of some of the projects mentioned in this book and who also prompted us to think differently about some of our ideas.

Thanks also to Naomi Stekelenburg from Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for helping with the editing prior to manuscript submission, and to all at Palgrave for your patience and support.

Nik would like to thank, as always, the furry folk in her household: Squirt, Loki, and Bailey. They remind her why this work is important, help her through the bad days, and provide a constant source of laughter.

Heather would like to thank Bruce (human partner), Alice (Bernese Mountain Dog), Murray (ginger collie-kelpie rescue), Gus (wire-haired Border Terrier), Sunny (ginger fluffy stray cat), and Charli (white patchy moggie) for their joyful and life-affirming support. She also remembers with love the dog from her childhood, called Teeny, and the cats, Fluffy, Cobber, Boney, and Boney Jnr.

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Fig. 1.1 Woman with cat on shoulder

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Human and Animal Victims of Domestic Violence: Being Rescued

Introduction

Domestic violence is a serious social problem across the world that has short- and long-term effects on individuals dominated and violated by trusted 'loved ones' (García-Moreno et al. 2005; Garcia-Moreno and Watts 2011). Beyond this, it also negatively impacts more than the immediate victims targeted and/or directly exposed to it. Extended families, local communities, and whole societies are impacted not only by the injuries that are caused—visible and hidden—but also by the estimated economic losses, such as lost days at work or the cost of healthcare to treat the injured (AIHW 2018; García-Moreno et al. 2005; Garcia-Moreno and Watts 2011). While not all injuries are permanent, many are; and in many places including the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and many European countries, homicides from domestic violence occur at least weekly (AIHW 2018; NCADV 2018; Statistics Canada 2016). For companion animals, however, domestic violence carries additional risks, such as being killed by human perpetrators of violence, often without any redress or public scrutiny; being left with violent perpetrators when human victims flee; and the very real possibility of being sent to an animal

N. Taylor, H. Fraser, *Companion Animals and Domestic Violence*, Palgrave Studies in Animals and Social Problems, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04125-0_1

shelter for fostering and adoption but picked up by a new human 'owner' and the possibility of forced euthanasia, even if rescued (see Patronek 1997). The main aims of this book are to (1) draw attention to the link between domestic violence and animal abuse, (2) take seriously the abuse (and neglect) companion animals can experience in domestic settings, and (3) more widely explore human-companion animal relations. In particular, we move beyond those mainstream discourses that stress the importance of acknowledging animal abuse largely, or solely, in order to recognise and address human-to-human abuse. One part of this is considering more-than-physical-violence harms done to animals experiencing domestic abuse. Another part is recognising how integral positive human-animal relations are to those (human and other species) trying to recover from domestic violence.

Our intention is to represent human-animal relationships in not only accurate but also dignifying ways. This calls for us to go beyond recounting the benefits humans can derive from companion animals as if animals were machines or commodities to be used and discarded. Focusing on the interconnectedness between humans (mostly women) and animals, we ask questions about interspecies reciprocity, mutuality, and welfare in the contexts of domestic domination, control, and violation. As a result, the central themes of this book are rescue, refuge, and recovery, in relation to human and animal victims/survivors' experiences of domestic violence. Yet, this book is as much about emotional connections and empathic love, as it is about seeking rescue and refuge from domestic violence. As we will show, interspecies companionate relationships of connection and love can be life sustaining. For more than a few caught up in domestic violence, these relationships can literally provide victims/survivors with the will to live, eat, sleep, and keep caring for others, and in the process, maintain the will to rebuild their lives.

As we will explain, it is a misconstruction to view companion animal relationships as unidirectional. Most do not flow from human to animal or vice versa. Instead, they are circular, flowing between human and animal and back again in a loop that is consistently reinforced through constant, caring, and empathic interactions. These interactions involve physical touch and proximity, non-verbal and verbal interactions, and an awareness of and curiosity about difference. In contrast to conventional

portraits of 'pet ownership,' they may be founded on empathy and not based on assumptions about animals' inferiority. We call these *empathic connections.* In this book, empathic connections are emotionally attuned interactions between humans and other animals that depend upon and promote emotional closeness, physical touch, care of self and other, and an awareness of each other's needs that may be different from our own. With these connections come feelings of rescue, refuge, and sanctuary.

As we explore in Chap. 4, when we speak of *empathic love* between humans and animals we are referring to ongoing, loving companionate relationships that are based on mutual regard and care, emotional attunement, and reciprocal responsiveness to each other's interests and welfare. Empathic love may also include alliances of solidarity, and not just emotional connection. These alliances may be the result of empathic connections, often forged by sharing domestic space together, which can engender some powerful entanglements, particularly in the context of domestic violence, where the power inequalities between humans and animals may be even more accentuated. Even so, an important part of this book is to draw attention to the asymmetrical power relationships that humans and companion animals can experience in the contexts of domestic abuse. By drawing attention to the negative effects domestic violence can have for companion animals, not just humans, we show how companion animals can be victims of domestic violence in their own right.

We use ideas from feminist intersectionality to recognise the potential interconnections between love and abuse, and gender and species. As we explain in Chaps. 3 and 7, our use of intersectionality focuses mostly on the intersections of species, gender, class, and sexuality. Because of the depth and richness of data from one of our projects in particular—the *Loving You, Loving Me* interviews (see Chap. 3 for a detailed outline)—we spend most time providing a close-up examination of nine women's reported experiences of domestic violence by abusive male spouses, along with focusing on the experiences of their companion animals. These stories are used for illustrative purposes, with the narrative details providing fine-grained understandings of how violence can take hold in domestic settings and be hard to recognise, dislodge, seek help for, and obtain some form of socio-cultural redress. Emblematic of the women's stories are the themes of relationships, rescue, refuge, and recovery. As the book unfolds,

these themes provide useful ways to consider the wider questions about the politics of domination and the construction of family and significant others.

We hope that this book will be a useful resource for those in domestic violence policy making, service provision and beyond, to draw on when making the case for the establishment of services that enable human and animal victims of domestic violence the opportunity to remain together. We also hope it will inspire more research and different forms of service provision that recognise the needs of animals caught up in domestic violence.

Nevertheless, a few caveats are in order. It is not our aim to suggest that it is only women—cisgender and heterosexual women—who are at risk of being subjected to domestic violence. It has now been well established that domestic violence negatively affects a diverse range of groups, across gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, and, as we will explore, species. Highlighting what animals mean to a small group of mostly heterosexual Australian women in domestic violence situations is just one part of a much broader suite of projects, programmes, and campaigns needed to advance collective understanding and prevention of domestic violence. Many other projects are being undertaken, and yet more still need to be initiated, to address and prevent violence against all groups, across age, genders, sexualities, and other categories of difference (e.g., children, men, women, transgender people, and others). Work taken to prevent and redress violence with victims who are also perpetrators of abuse is equally important. Anger management work, behaviour change programmes, and other attempts to intervene in domestic violence all have a place in the collective efforts to stem and prevent domestic violence. Many other projects and possibilities could be mentioned. Our point is that we recognise that domestic violence has many possibilities, 'or faces,' and many complexities. It is not just something that happens to heterosexual women, and certainly not as passive victims with masochistic tendencies. But it is something that happens to many heterosexual women and, by extension, their companion animals, which is the focus of our book.

As we will show later in this book, several studies have shown that it is common for many victims of domestic violence to remain in violent

situations for fear of their animals' safety and well-being. We also know that for those who do end up fleeing without their animals, additional guilt and fear are likely (see Chaps. 2 and 6 for more information). Much less considered is the depth of the connection between human and companion animal victims throughout these experiences. In particular, we have insufficient knowledge about how human-animal connections can help both human and animal trauma victims try to heal in the aftermath of the violence. This is a driving force for the book. Highlighting these deep, emotional interspecies connections and the benefits they can produce for both is one way to advocate for services that protect both human and animal victims of domestic violence. By focusing on the animals, and on the bond between human and animal victims, it may also be a more engaging and effective way to engage the wider public in serious and informed discussions of domestic violence.

While domestic violence is more commonly discussed in public than it was historically, there are still several serious misnomers about it. Many people, for example, still feel it is a 'private' issue that occurs in the home, and few people have a real sense of the daily fear and terror involved for those who are victims of domestic violence. In part, this is a result of it being a difficult and emotional issue to discuss, one that—like animal abuse—is much easier to turn away from. However, we need to dispel existing myths about it if we are to truly address the staggering ubiquity of its practice (see Chap. 2). The first step in achieving this, as those who so courageously highlighted its existence several decades ago pointed out (e.g., Pizzey 1974), is to make it a public, not private, issue. That means we need to engage people about the topic. This isn't easy to do but a focus on the animal victims, and on the positive aspects of our relationships with other animals in post-abuse situations, is, we think, likely to engage all sorts of people who would normally turn away from the issues.

Working on the various projects that form the basis of this book, which we sketch shortly and detail in Chap. 3, has brought the personal experiences both of us had with domestic violence into full view and has, in some ways, added to the already existing challenges of doing work in this area. It has also given us a deeper understanding of the emotions wrought in our participants when they recounted aspects of their abuse while talking to us. And it has ensured that we remain committed to spreading the

word about links between domestic violence and animal abuse far and wide—both within and without scholarly publications. Engaging others in the fight for change means first reaching them and, often, prying their eyes open to the realities of domestic violence, for both humans and other animals. This has been the driving force behind all of the projects we have conducted together and that underpin this book.

About Us

I (Nik) am a sociologist who came to research links between human and animal directed violence after years volunteering in animal shelters in the UK. There, I witnessed first-hand the results of the physical and sexual abuse of domestic animals, especially dogs. According to petabuse.com in the US, dogs were the most commonly abused species, accounting for 70.1% of cases, while cats accounted for 20.9% and 'other' animals 24.1% of reported abuse cases in 2011. It was during my time at the animal shelter that I first began to understand the extent of the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence, thanks to a social worker who volunteered at the shelter. At his urging we often fostered the dogs of women entering refuges after fleeing violence, who could not take their animal companions with them, and who refused to leave the violent home until they were assured their animals were safe. This made sense of my early experiences as a teenager in a violent relationship where the perpetrator would often harm his father's dog as a warning to me 'to behave.' At that time, echoing the experiences of many women in violent relationships, I did not know this was a common tactic and so did not know how to speak out about it or who to ask for help.

While I (Nik) have gone on to address human-animal abuse links more broadly in my research (e.g., in slaughterhouses and through meat eating practices), I remain committed to scholar advocacy on behalf of those animals and humans trapped in violent homes because of a general refusal to recognise the importance of other animals and of our relationships with them. This refusal to see, recognise, and work with cross-species relationships means there are few services on offer for humans whose animals are being harmed as part of the violence in their homes. Even

fewer are the services on offer for the animals caught in these situations. Few services have allowed animals and their humans to stay together and while, fortunately, this is starting to change the generalised underfunding of the domestic violence service provision sector means there are not enough safe places for human and animal victims of domestic violence (also see Chaps. 5 and 6). Drawing attention to the interconnections of human and animal directed domestic violence is one way to (try to) secure more funding and support for those humans and animals in these situations.

In contrast to Nik, I (Heather) came to work in the area of violence and abuse, specifically domestic violence and child abuse, first as a children's advocate in a local women's shelter and then as a youth worker in residential care for 12–18-year-old young people, most of whom had experienced chronic abuse, neglect, and deprivation. For short periods, early in my career, I also worked in residential care for elderly people, and people with hearing impairments. This was through the 1980s and I can think of no time when the bond many of us have with companion animals was recognised through, for example, their living on, or visiting these, premises. Similarly, as a social worker who graduated in 1988, I spent the next 20 years claiming to love animals but paying no attention to them in my professional practice, including community practices where so many companion animals are housed. Like most social workers, I assumed the concept of 'social' only applied to humans.

I (Heather) grew up in Elizabeth, South Australia, among many other working-class families trying to make their way after migrating to Australia. Throughout my childhood, I lived with companion animals that were loved but, looking back, were not always properly cared for. In our house, domestic violence was a problem for all of us, including our cats and dog. Like some children exposed to domestic violence, these animals were not the direct targets of my father's violence. Yet, they still suffered. They still felt the tensions, the explosions, the yelling, and the destruction. After particularly intense episodes, there were the challenges of trusting not just each other but that there would be the space to let our guards down and relax in each other's company. When we did so, the connections felt even stronger, pulling us together in a shared experience of fear and intimidation. Further complicating matters, and common to

many domestic violence dynamics for humans and animals, were the many attempts the animals made to placate my father, to soothe him when they (like us) felt a build-up in his anger that he could control with his boss and mates at the pub but not at home.

Seven years ago, when we began our collaboration, we didn't know that our experiences in animal and human shelter work would converge. Nor did we realise that this work would lead us to very similar shared ideologies regarding issues such as abuse, power, speciesism, domination, and oppression (we discuss our shared theoretical positions in detail in Chap. 2). Both our shared theoretical interests, and our differences in approach, have been crucial to the development of all our work, allowing us to stretch each other's thinking in respectful and dialogic ways. Our deep and intellectually curious friendship has enabled us to challenge ourselves and each other, while feeling supported. We identify with Lopez and Gillespie (2016, 1690) when they talk about the "buddy system," which they characterise as something "developed through our close friendship, our care for and about one another, and our ongoing concern about the emotional toll wrought by solitary research about violent systems and their embodied effects."

As Lopez and Gillespie point out, neoliberal conceptions of research stress disembodied objectivity, which is often at odds with the kind of work feminist researchers do, particularly when they/we focus on aspects of gendered and/or speciesist violence (see Fraser and Taylor 2016). In our view, to not care about the group members we research with and/or for is an unethical and therefore untenable position for us to maintain. Rather than strike the pose of the detached, objective, neutral observer, we argue for transparency of values and trustworthiness in the research process. In part, this is why we shared information about our histories and our positions in the previous paragraphs. Most importantly, we support the longstanding feminist injunction towards praxis, that is, the extension of feminist politics beyond theory, beyond method and into the very research relationship itself. For us, this means acknowledging and supporting each other's journey through the research while at the same time using the emotions it stirs analytically. As Lopez and Gillespie (2016, 1694) put it,

> Grief already underwrites much of our research – we research the things we do precisely because we care. While 'reason' and 'objectivity' are privileged

> within research, we argue with other feminist scholars, so too should be emotion … Centering the researchers' emotional responses is a mode of politicising the ways in which they reveal insights about the nature and form of the violent processes we study … we are enacting a kind of caring that reaches beyond the realm of friendship and into a radical form of scholarship that takes into account the very lonely work done by academics even as we acknowledge how very relational and interdependent we are.

As scholar activists we undertake all our work with a view to, at its simplest level, making (at least some) lives better. This book and the projects it is based on are no different. Specifically, we hope to contribute to the collective improvement of the lives of victims/survivors of abuse, both human and animal.

Trigger Warnings and Transformative Education

Before proceeding any further, however, we want to acknowledge the sensitivity of the material explored in this book and the dilemmas we have faced deciding which stories to reveal in this book that illustrate domestic violence in action. We acknowledge that some of the material in the book might be difficult to read and think about, particularly first-hand accounts of being violated. We recognise the possibility of readers—especially those who have survived violence—being triggered or activated. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 contain the most extensive and revealing stories about experiencing violence, so these chapters might be treated with more caution than others.

Vicarious or secondary trauma is not a phenomenon to be ignored or dismissed, as domestic violence workers, and social workers more generally, understand (Bride 2007). Some stories break through our defences, sometimes unexpectedly. We know this from our own experiences as activist-scholars, campaigning against human and animal rights violations. There are times that such exposure is too overwhelming, while at other times, it can feel more manageable. We must collectively persevere because responding to and preventing domestic violence requires us to

face some of the harsh realities others experience, if we are to understand and empathise with their plight. In so doing, we must find ways to protect ourselves while remaining sufficiently open, compassionate, and empathic to those most negatively affected by domestic violence.

Whether on the frontline giving support to victims/survivors of domestic violence or undertaking research with people 'in the field' (as we have done), some defences are required to prevent ourselves from becoming overwhelmed and potentially paralysed, particularly by the frequency, gravity, and unfairness of the violence (also see Bride 2007). It can be a delicate position to get right, for frontline workers, researchers, and anti-abuse campaigners alike. It is not easy to find ways to stimulate useful discussions about domestic violence and motivate action—without being gratuitous in the exploration of violence. We are not interested in reproducing examples of violence to shock and distress readers, even under the guise of scholarly study. Yet, we also do not want to sanitise victims' stories or make them more palatable. We have given much thought to selecting excerpts from participants' transcripts, including consideration of the purpose and/or necessity of including explicit content about violence. Yet, caution must still be shown by each reader.

We are also aware that trigger warnings are not themselves unproblematic. Depending on how they are used, trigger warnings can be used to shut down important discussions. While we appreciate their concerns about trigger warnings, we do not share Lukianoff and Haidt's (2015) contention that they inevitably coddle people and are expressions of vindictive protectiveness. We also appreciate that, in and of themselves, trigger warnings cannot prevent the restimulation of past trauma. Instead, we include such a warning here in case it helps readers prepare themselves for the content of this book, especially Chaps. 4, 5, and 6.

Overview of Projects That Underpin This Book

This book is based on work that we have done throughout our respective 20-year-plus careers, including work done prior to our collaboration, and during our partnership over the last 7 years. There is one project, in

particular, from which we draw many of our illustrative examples. It is the *Loving You, Loving Me* project, sketched below and detailed in Chap. 3. Findings from other human-animal relationship projects have also informed this book, including a couple led by our friend and colleague, Damien Riggs. While not all of these studies focused explicitly on domestic violence/abuse, they all addressed questions about the depth of connections many people feel with their companion animals. Below we outline the projects that have informed this book.

Loving You, Loving Me (2016–2018)

In 2016 we designed a project to engage the public in discussions about domestic violence and animal abuse. We wanted it to be eye-catching and accessible, dynamic and engaging. We called it the *Loving You, Loving Me* project to place love, not just abuse, at the centre of our inquiry. In doing so we hoped that we might engage people who ordinarily turn away from discussions of abuse, whether because of discomfort, sadness, or long-held beliefs about the lack of importance such discussions had for their lives. Our main partner, the Northern Domestic Violence Service (NDVS), initially raised an eyebrow at the mention of love, perhaps wondering whether this focus would trivialise their clients' experiences of being violated. We understood this and elaborated our rationale. Focusing on love, particularly the experiences of love their clients felt to and from their animal companions, would help to marginalise perpetrators of abuse—symbolically make them recede from view. Written accounts of human and animal experiences of being brutalised would then be analysed to explain how domestic violence can occur and how victims can get stuck in situations that can quickly spiral out of their control. So, we designed a project with two parts: (1) an art and photographic exhibition of human and animal victims surviving violence together and (2) a qualitative study involving interviews with human victims in their homes, in the presence of their companion animals.

For the *Loving You* project we interviewed nine women who had previously experienced domestic violence. Throughout these interviews we focused on their relationships with their companion animals. At the