Aggression and Violent Behavior xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

Pets in danger: Exploring the link between domestic violence and animal abuse

Michelle Newberry *

Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S10 2BP, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 September 2015
Received in revised form 6 November 2016
Accepted 8 November 2016
Available online xxxx

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

ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

1.1. The link between domestic violence and companion animal abuse

A growing body of literature indicates that domestic violence (DV) is related to companion animal abuse (e.g. Ascione, 1998; Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Heath, Maruyama & Hayashi, 2007; Boat, 2014; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Nielsen, 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Flynn, 2000a, 2000b, 2009; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber, & Miles, 2013; Hartman, Hageman, Williams, & Ascione, 2015; Hartman, Hageman, Williams, Mary, & Ascione, 2016; Jorgenson & Maloney, 1999; Knight, Ellis, & Simmons, 2014; McDonald et al., 2015; McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2016; McPhedran, 2009; Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2012; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). Most research in this area has involved interviewing and/or administering questionnaires to victims in DV shelters to determine the prevalence of companion animal abuse, and a number of studies have reported that approximately half of DV victims have witnessed threats toward, or the actual abuse of a companion animal. Carlisle-Frank et al. (2004) found that companion animal abuse was reported by 53% of DV victims in shelters in New York, and Allen, Gallagher, and Jones (2006) reported that 57% of 23 women in DV shelters in Ireland had witnessed the abuse of a companion animal. In another study, Ascione et al. (2007) found that 54% of 101 DV victims interviewed in shelters in Utah reported that their partner had harmed or killed a companion animal, compared to 5% of a control group of non-DV victims. Similarly, Volant et al. (2008) interviewed 102 DV victims in Australia and found that 52.9% reported the abuse of a companion animal, compared to 0% of a control group of 102 non-DV victims. In a later study which interviewed 19 women in DV shelters in Illinois, Hardesty et al. (2013) found that 47% of victims reported the abuse of a companion animal at the hands of a controlling partner. More recently, Hartman et al. (2015) found that 11.7% of 291 victims residing in DV shelters or receiving non-residential services from a DV agency in the US had witnessed threats toward a companion animal, and that 26.1% had witnessed the actual harm of an animal. However, as the authors note, these findings represent a lower rate of companion animal abuse than found in other studies that have not included a large proportion of Hispanic participants. Faver and Strand (2007) also reported a lower prevalence rate of companion animal abuse among Hispanic DV victims (36%), and Simmons and Lehmann (2007) reported a prevalence rate of 25% among DV victims in Texas, although they did not state whether this lower rate was attributable to the inclusion of Hispanic participants.

1.2. How companion animals are abused by domestic violence perpetrators

Research has found that the abuse of companion animals is a coercive tactic used by DV perpetrators to control their partners (Allen et

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: m.newberry@shu.ac.uk.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.11.007
1359-1789/

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

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

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

1.4. The current study

Whilst the aforementioned studies have furthered our understanding about the prevalence of companion animal abuse and DV victims' experiences of animal abuse, questionnaire-based studies in this area are limited in terms of how much in-depth data they can provide about what appears to be a complex web of abusive behavior. Interview-based studies also have their drawbacks. For example, interviewees may experience feelings of shame and embarrassment, or be susceptible to social desirability effects. In addition, interviews may deter victims from truthfully sharing their experiences once they are aware that researchers have a duty to disclose certain information to the authorities (such as expressions of self-harm/intention to harm another person, and information pertaining to a child at risk of abuse). Another limitation of research which directly accesses DV victims is that it may typically capture more serious incidents of DV/animal abuse which may limit our understanding of the full spectrum of these behaviors (e.g. shelters may house victims who have experienced more prolonged and/or serious abuse). Furthermore, the use of participant inclusion criteria limits the collection of data from the outset in some studies. For example, in recent research (Hartman et al., 2015, 2016), adult victims were only eligible to be interviewed if they had experienced DV within the past 12 months, had a companion animal living with them within this timeframe, and had at least one child aged 7–12 years living in the home. It therefore cannot be determined how far their findings extend to individuals who have experienced DV (or had a companion animal) at a point further in the past, as well as victims without children in this age group (or who do not have children living with them). Finally, because studies in this area have tended to utilize small samples in specific regions (e.g. Hardesty et al., 2013 who interviewed 19 DV victims in Illinois), findings may not be generalizable.

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

2. Method

2.1. Identification of stories

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

Please cite this article as: Newberry, M., Pets in danger: Exploring the link between domestic violence and animal abuse, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.11.007