Development of Emergency Intimate Partner Violence Shelters

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When a woman seeks emergency shelter from an abusive relationship, she may bring her children but rarely companion animals. Companion animals are viewed as problematic, as obstacles to their clients' safe relocation, falling outside the scope of IPV shelters (who rarely take a co-sheltering approach), and as potential strains on an already resource-stretched social institution. Addressing a gap in the literature about the effects of companion animal policies in social housing on clients and staff, the results are relevant to social service providers and policymakers working with multispecies families, including insights about women and children's reactions to separation from companion animals, contradictions in related policies, and institutional priorities.

multispecies families | IPV shelters | co-sheltering | companion animals | speciesism | social housing | housing policy

1. Introduction

Studies indicate that there are few options for women who wish to include companion animals as members of their family when fleeing from violence (Gray et al. 2019; Matsuoka et al. 2020; Stevenson 2009; Stevenson et al. 2018). Most emergency intimate partner violence (IPV) shelters are not able to accommodate multispecies families; companion animals are rarely, if ever, permitted. Initiatives that are alternatives to co-sheltering, such as the fostering of companion animals (Flynn 2000; Kogan et al. 2004), do not keep companion animals with their families (Krienert et al. 2012; Matsuoka et al. 2020; Stevenson 2009; Taylor et al. 2020).

Families include other species, yet these multispecies groupings are rarely the focus of sociological research. Taylor writes that, "since the social world with which sociologists concern themselves has always been a multi-species one, it is time for sociology as a discipline to reflect this" (Taylor et al. 2018, p. 465). It focuses on the perspectives of shelter workers about multispecies families in emergency IPV facilities, asking the question: How do multispecies families fit in emergency IPV shelters? As a work of activist-scholarship (Meyer 2005) employing a qualitative methodology and the conceptual approach of critical animal studies (CAS), this aims to contribute, broadly, to the sociological knowledge of multispecies families.

The constructed category of species is used as the basis for excluding companion animals from IPV shelters: an act of speciesism. Speciesism, a term coined by Richard Ryder (1989), "refers to an ideology which supports treating sentient and morally equivalent beings differently on the basis of species alone, rather than giving them

equal consideration" (Matsuoka et al. 2020, p. 56). Companion animals in multispecies families are not accommodated, based on their constructed, nonhuman status (Irvine and Cilia 2017; Kirksey 2015; Matsuoka et al. 2020). Through a Critical Animal Studies (CAS) lens, in the broader shelter system, humans and nonhuman animals are sorted by such categories; species is used along with other categories such as gender and ability to oppress and divide. For example, there are different shelters and transitional spaces for homeless individuals, those exiting incarceration, companion animals, and IPV survivors.

2. History and Development

Sociological research on women help-seeking with companion animals reveals multiple challenges to safe relocation, even after the woman has decided to leave ([1] 2001; Barrett et al. 2017). Over time, studies continue to find that many women delay or do not leave their abuser out of concern for their companion animals (Barrett et al. 2018; Crawford and Bohac Clarke 2012; Fitzgerald 2005; Fitzgerald et al. 2019; Giesbrecht 2021a; Gray et al. 2019; Stevenson et al. 2018; Taylor et al. 2020; Wuerch et al. 2021). Studies in the United States have found that women remain in abusive homes because of companion animals (Ascione et al. 2007; Faver and Strand 2003; Flynn 2000; Krienert et al. 2012; Strand and Faver 2005). In Canada, nearly half of women stay or delay leaving because they cannot bring their companion animals with them (Barrett et al. 2018; Fitzgerald 2005). In their Canadian sample, Stevenson et al. (2018) found that "the majority of shelter staff (74.8%) … were aware of abused women in the community who did not access the shelter because they could not bring their pets with them" (p. 242). Recent studies in Saskatchewan with human service providers and animal welfare workers find that not being able to co-shelter with a companion animal is contributing to women remaining with their abuser (Giesbrecht 2021a; [2] 2021). Even if women leave the home for a shelter, they may return to care for their companion animals (Giesbrecht 2021b; Stevenson et al. 2018; Wuerch et al. 2021).

For many women, companion animals are a key source of support. Of the women in Flynn's (2000) study, for instance, forty percent stayed or delayed leaving, explaining they viewed their "pet as a source of emotional support" (p. 169). Bonds between women and their companion animals (Barrett et al. 2018; Faver and Strand 2003; Matsuoka et al. 2020; Stevenson et al. 2018; Strand and Faver 2005) are particularly strong and important when violence is present (Barrett et al. 2018). Further, research has found that companionship from animals may aid in feelings of security, or a sense of being "at home" (Kidd and Kidd 1994; Irvine 2013), an "attachment safe haven" (Lem et al. 2013; Kerman et al. 2019) that is a source of protection with emotional benefits.

Moreover, there is a recognized link between human and nonhuman animal abuse. Here find that companion animals are similarly at risk of violence (Boat 1995; Fitzgerald 2005; Fitzgerald et al. 2019; Flynn 2011; Newberry 2017; Arluke et al. 2009). The co-occurrence of nonhuman and human abuse in the home is well documented (Barrett et al. 2017; Boat 1995; Fitzgerald 2005; Flynn 2011; Newberry 2017). In cases of IPV, the abuser may leverage the woman's bond with her companion animals, and threaten, harm, or otherwise use these animals to manipulate and control her (Barrett et al. 2017; Fitzgerald 2005; Fitzgerald et al. 2019). The use of companion animals as bargaining tools in such situations is acknowledged in the literature (Mills and Akers 2002; Rook 2014),

with laws to address it often modeled after child law (Rook 2014). Notably, companion animals are considered property under Canadian law (Sorenson 2010), significantly complicating their place and “rights” in cases of abuse.

Studies also demonstrate that leaving companion animals behind places them at risk (Flynn 2000; Gray et al. 2019; Stevenson 2009; Stevenson et al. 2018). This potential for further harm is another factor preventing women from leaving. Stevenson et al. (2018) found in their sample that shelter workers knew of women leaving the shelter to return to the home to care for their companion animals. For those that do leave their nonhuman companions behind, the limited research on this topic finds various fates for those companions. In Flynn (2000), more than half of these animals remained in residence with the abuser (55%), resulting in many respondents expressing deep concern for their companions’ safety (p. 169). The others were left with family or friends (25%), surrendered to an animal shelter, or worse (i.e., abandoned) (Flynn 2000, p. 169). Other arrangements that women and shelters may utilize include keeping their companions: with other family or friends, in temporary kennels, with veterinarians, or in foster care (Flynn 2000; Kogan et al. 2004). Studies of what happens to the companion animals who are turned away from IPV shelters are near absent in the sociological literature, to the knowledge of the author.

Knowing about companion animal abuse helps shelters better assess the risk to the women they serve (Fitzgerald et al. 2019; Gray et al. 2019). Fitzgerald et al. (2019) explain:
Specifying the factors that increase the probability of pet abuse is critical to inform the development of risk assessment measures that can identify pets that may be in elevated danger, as well as people who are being victimized and whose decision making regarding leaving the relationship may be shaped by the abuse of their pet(s).

(p. 2).

As such, knowing about companion animals in the home helps emergency shelters better develop safety and care plans. This last point mirrors recommendations that shelters ask about companion animals when performing risk assessments or safety plans (Barrett et al. 2018; Fitzgerald 2005; Gray et al. 2019; Stevenson et al. 2018), as “promoting the safety of pets is critical not only for the well-being of animals but also for the protection of the people who care for them” (Fitzgerald et al. 2019, p. 2).

IPV shelters often advocate for a trauma-informed approach (TIA) to service delivery. TIAs are grounded in the understanding that the psychological effects of trauma require specialized care that is individualized, centred around, and largely guided by the survivor, prioritizing her/his autonomy and unique needs, and the fostering of trust and feelings of safety, where the survivor decides the pace and scope of care (Kulkarni 2019). Further, research demonstrates that such a “survivor-defined advocacy” model (Stevenson et al. 2018, p. 247) also identifies and addresses systemic issues that affect the clients of IPV shelters (Davies and Lyon 2013; Kulkarni et al. 2015; Stevenson et al. 2018). Shelters and shelter workers may encounter difficulty in actually implementing a TIA approach, such as limited resources like labour and funding and competing time pressures (Burnett et al. 2016; Stevenson et al. 2018).

Although IPV shelters are a fixture in Canadian social services, there is limited literature on how applicable policies and protocols affect service delivery (Burnett et al. 2016). Responsibility for social housing, such as IPV shelters, was downloaded from the federal government to the provinces in 1993 (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1444). Beginning in 1995, this social service became further altered in Ontario as oversight was passed to the municipalities (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1444). In the province, IPV shelters fall under the umbrella of Ontario's Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services 2022), "but they operate in a complex web of federal, provincial, and municipal policies" (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1444).

Non-profit agencies primarily run the IPV shelters in Ontario (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1444; Laforest 2013). Research finds that the added responsibility of compliance with various governmental legislation is costly for shelters, in time and labour (Burnett et al. 2016). Beyond the requirements of funders, shelters also have to consider regulations related to employment standards, building codes, water and fire safety, and disability accommodations (Burnett et al. 2016, p. 523). Research has found that "shelter workers become astute system knowledge brokers" (Burnett et al. 2016, p. 517) in response to the complex needs of their clients and the regulations they are subject to. In other words, in order to fulfil their mandate of keeping abused women and their children safe, staff learn to navigate multiple policies and priorities related to recovery and life after the shelter, all in a short time and during a period of great upheaval for their clients, in tandem with the effects of such trauma.

Applicable then is research that examines the larger social housing system in Canada. The populations known to access public housing, in general, are those at risk for homelessness, low income, seniors, or those with disabilities (McCabe et al. 2021, p. 292). Much of past (Blau 1988; Hill 1991) and current scholarship and policy debate about social housing is divided by the believed causes of poverty and homelessness (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1445). The discourse either posits that blame lies in personal failings and is thus an individual responsibility, or in systemic inadequacies, such as governmental policies and shortfalls in funding (Johnstone et al. 2017, p. 1445). What these policies and priorities are and how they impact the work of shelter employees and thus indirectly affect clients is an important area of research. Work carried out on companion animal policies in IPV shelters reveals inconsistencies in policies and even confusion or a lack of discussion within shelters about how they help clients with companion animals (Gray et al. 2019). One study suggested that workers do what they can in each case to keep women safe, gesturing to ad hoc problem-solving around companion animals, but also that some workers may not mention companion animals at intake due to a lack of clarity or solid options for their care (Stevenson et al. 2018).

Thus, research continues to demonstrate the importance of knowing about companion animals in the lives of IPV clients, and to provide access to multispecies emergency shelter from intimate partner violence. Attention to the companion species in abusive homes remains limited and as such there is an "urgency of better understanding and mitigating the unique barriers to leaving an abusive relationship faced by women with companion animals" (Barrett et al. 2017, p. 2).

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