

Editorial Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that many humans enjoy close, meaningful relationships with animal companions. Unfortunately, such relationships can make both humans and animals vulnerable to those who might seek to abuse them. To date, a focus on what is known as ‘the link’ between human and animal-directed abuse has focused almost exclusively on heterosexual, cisgender people. More recently, however, research has turned to consider the relationships between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) humans and animals, including relationships where abuse may be evident. This research, as summarised in this brief, suggests unique issues at stake for LGBTQ people and the animals they share their lives with.

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Victims/Survivors of Family and Domestic Violence in Diverse, Multispecies Households

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Introduction

Domestic and family violence (DFV), including but not limited to intimate partner violence (IPV), is a major and devastating problem in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). This is especially true for cisgender women (Fraser, 2008), people who are gender and/or sexuality diverse (Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, et al., 2018), and children (Fraser, 1999). Less recognised is that DFV is also a major problem for many animals (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Humans have a long history of keeping animal companions (or ‘pets’) in their homes, and today 61% of Australian households are multispecies (RSPCA, 2020). Recent research has shown just how much diverse groups of humans value the relationships they have with animal companions—particularly among those who are more vulnerable to oppression, such as cisgender heterosexual women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer [LGBTQ] people (see Fraser & Taylor, 2017, 2019). Such relationships put animal companions at significant risk of violence within the home, as they may be targets of violence and are often used as ‘coercive devices’ (i.e., used by an abuser to make the victim/survivor behave in a certain way) within violent intimate partner and family dynamics. This begs consideration of a multispecies, intersectional analysis that fosters an inclusive understanding of the importance of animals in multispecies households, including their own experiences of violence.

Multispecies Families

In Australian population statistics, families are typically defined as at least one adult and their children; however, it is increasingly common for families to also refer to couple relationships absent of children and people living alone (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016). Despite this diversification of our

understanding of families, Australian population statistics remain resolutely anthropocentric, ignoring the large and growing numbers of individuals who live with animal companions, as shown in Figure 1.

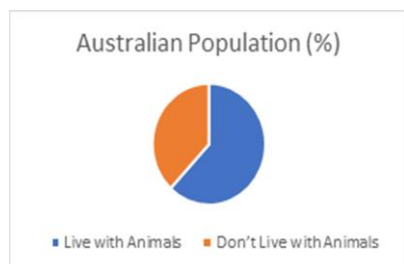


Figure 1

Animal Companions in Australian Households

Source: Animal Medicines Australia (2016).

Importantly, for many—if not most people—animals are not simply ‘pets’, but much-loved family members (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). For humans who consider animals to be part of the family, considerable work is often undertaken to bridge the animal–human divide. Many humans talk to their animal companions, not only because many animals understand human words (e.g., dogs up to 500 words), but also because of the emotional communication that takes place, which helps to strengthen the human–animal bond. Verbal and non-verbal negotiations also routinely take place about cohabiting spaces (i.e., sharing beds, and being directed by the needs of animals such as for safety, emotional comfort and exercise). While power imbalances often mean that humans make ultimate decisions about cohabitation in multispecies families, animals are certainly not without agency (Fraser & Taylor, 2019). Indeed, they shape how humans experience the home environment and the broader

environment and the broader world (Taylor & Signal, 2011). However, their presence in the home also leaves them vulnerable to domestic violence.

Violence, Justice and Intersectionality

More than three decades of international research has established ‘The Link’, which refers to the relationship between human and animal abuse, and the fact that there is a greater likelihood that people who abuse animals are also likely to abuse humans (see National Link Coalition, n.d.). For example, in one Australian study, 52.9% (54 of 102) of women recruited through Victorian DFV services reported that their partners had abused their companion animals and 46% reported threats made against animals (Volant et al., 2008). Concern over animal wellbeing is also a factor often preventing human victim/survivors from leaving abusive relationships for fear of further, retaliatory animal abuse perpetrated against animals remaining with an abuser. For example, in the Volant et al. (2008) study, 33% of women from their sample who were in crisis accommodation at the time ($n = 33$) indicated that fear of animals being hurt delayed their attempts to exit an abusive relationship by between one to more than eight weeks. Fear of animal abuse is also a factor in decisions to return to abusers, with one study finding that one third of women were considering returning due to concern for their animals (Barrett et al., 2017).

We welcome recognition of the links between human and animal abuse and the concomitant

highlighting of animal cruelty experiences. However, much of the current research in the area is both largely cisgender and/or heterosexual focused and anthropocentric. Much of the research situates animal cruelty primarily, if not exclusively, as a red flag for human–human violence (e.g., DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). This largely ignores and invisibilises the experiences of other animals as victims of abuse in their own right (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Similarly, precious little research on human–animal violence links has sought to understand it in the context of LGBTQ people’s lives, despite the existing but scant research indicating there are LGBTQ-specific issues that need to be addressed (Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, et al., 2018).

In the extant body of research about human–animal abuses, both oversights are easily rectified by a multispecies, intersectional approach as a frame for understanding human-companion animal relations (see Fraser & Taylor, 2019). Such an approach makes visible the intersections of how different species, genders and sexualities experience violence. It does this by focusing on the mechanisms of power and oppression at play. This lens allows for recognition of interspecies care and empathy as the basis for transformative relations, allowing us to think about connections, similarity and difference in non-oppressive ways (see Fraser & Taylor, 2019). The first step involves acknowledging not only that multispecies relations exist, but also that they matter deeply to many, including to gender- and sexuality-diverse people.

DFV, Gender- and Sexuality-diverse People, and their Animal Companions

While figures on animal companionship are typically not reported in terms of gender or sexuality, some studies have compiled animal companionship rates in LGBTQ households. The Australian biennial HIV Futures study, which primarily includes gay men in the samples, consistently reports animal companionship rates of approximately 50% (Grierson et al., 2013). Elsewhere, research from the United States (US) suggests companion animal rates of 70% among transgender people (Fuller & Riggs, 2018), while international comparative research from Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) posits the same proportion among LGBTQ people (Riggs, Taylor, Signal, et al., 2018).

Research has repeatedly shown that LGBTQ people are as likely to experience DFV as heterosexual and/or cisgender groups (see Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, et al., 2018; Riggs, Taylor, Signal, et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). While comparing international studies is difficult due to the use of differing measures and sample populations, both Tables 1 and 2 indicate the varying rates of DFV experienced among lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Overall, research on transgender people tends to suggest much higher rates of DFV experienced (Riggs et al., 2016).

Table 1: Comparative rates of DFV among lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual people

	Lesbian	Bisexual women	Heterosexual women	Gay	Bisexual men	Heterosexual men
Rape	*	22.1%	9.1%	*	*	*
Physical violence	40.4%	56.9%	32.3%	25.2%	37.3%	28.7%
Stalking	*	31.1%	10.2%	*	*	2.1%
Rape, physical violence, and/or stalking	43.8%	61.1%	35.0%	26.0%	37.3%	29.0%
Any psychological aggression	63.0%	76.2%	47.5%	59.6%	53.0%	49.3%

* = not reported as too small to produce reliable estimates.

Source: Walter, Chen and Breiding (2013).

Table 2: Rates of IPV experiences among lesbian women and men who have sex with men

Population group	Any IPV	Physical violence	Sexual violence	Psychological/emotional violence
Self-identified lesbians (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2015)	48%	18%	14%	43%
Men who have sex with men (Buller et al., 2014)	41.25%	24.05%	14.60%	34.44%

Source: Badenes-Ribera et al., 2015; Buller et al., 2014

Focus on violence perpetrated against animals in LGBTQ people’s lives is less common. Early research by Renzetti (1992) conducted in the US reported that of the 100 lesbian women surveyed about experiences of DFV, only 15% reported the abuse of an animal by an intimate partner. Similarly, early research by Merrill and Wolfe (2000) also within the US reported that of 52 gay men surveyed about DFV, 17% reported the abuse of an animal by an intimate partner.

Our own, more recent international comparative work looking at Australia and the UK found that of the 503 LGBTQ people surveyed, for those who had experienced DFV 21% had also experienced the abuse of an animal by an intimate partner (Riggs, Taylor, Fraser, et al., 2018). Participants living with animals reported that sometimes they were a barrier to leaving an abusive relationship, for fear of what a partner might do to animals if they could not leave with their human (Taylor et al., 2019; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). However, other participants reported that seeing the abuse of an animal provided enough impetus to leave an abusive relationship (Rosenberg et al., 2020)

Notably, much of the research summarised here focuses on intimate partner violence and the involvement of animals, with less attention given to family violence and the involvement of animals (for exceptions see Riggs, Taylor, Signal, et al., 2018). This is a matter of particular concern, given that LGBTQ young people living with their families experience high levels of abuse (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). In relation to animals, recent Australian

research on the experiences of 711 transgender young people noted that 65.5% spent time with animals to feel better (Strauss et al., 2017). Given that such time spent can help offset experiences of marginalisation and abuse (Rosenberg et al., 2020), it is important to consider how animals living with transgender young people—and LGBTQ young people more broadly—may be used as coercive devices by family members who seek to deny a young person’s gender or sexual diversity.

Service Delivery Inclusive of Diverse People and Animals

Half a century of great work has been done in Australia to recognise the ‘heterosexual face’ (Gray et al., 2020, p. 21) of DFV, and to reach out to cisgender

women DFV victims/survivors and their children (Fraser, 1999, 2008; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). We must now fully recognise the harms other groups face from DFV, and now fully recognise the harms other groups face from DFV, and the equally disturbing traumatic trajectories that stem from those harms. Our studies have shown the importance of recognising diverse victims/survivors of DFV, including those who are not human, and the benefits that service providers can derive from thinking about DFV in relation to diverse multispecies households (Fraser et al., 2019). Our research has also shown us that across victim/survivor groups, asking about animals companions, showing interest in their wellbeing, and including them in any interventions goes a long way to engaging people who are often reluctant to get involved in DFV services (Fraser et al., 2019).

Simply put, more DFV service responses are needed that welcome diverse groups of people and the animals they call family (Fraser et al., 2019). A few of the many possible ways forward are to (a) draw on existing research to substantiate the need for funding ‘pet-friendly’ and LGBTQ DFV programs and, therefore, advocate for more funding in what is a chronically underfunded area. We can also (b) support LGBTQ victims/survivors to care for themselves and their animal companions, who are also recovering from exposure to DFV, and further (c) evaluate these programs, paying attention to the engagement of human DFV victims/survivors with no prior service history and who might have otherwise been considered ‘hard to reach’ (Fraser et al., 2019)

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