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Intimate Partner Violence Survivors' Reports of Their Children's Exposure to Companion Animal Maltreatment: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Children living in households where intimate partner violence (IPV) is present are at increased risk of being exposed to concomitant maltreatment of companion animals. Recent research suggests that childhood exposure to maltreatment of companion animals is associated with compromised socioemotional well-being in childhood and adulthood. To date, there is a dearth of qualitative research examining how children experience animal maltreatment in the context of IPV. The current qualitative study explored the following research question in an ethnically diverse sample of IPV survivors: How do maternal caregivers convey the ways in which their children experience animal maltreatment in IPV-affected households? Sixty-five women with at least one child (age 7–12 years) were recruited from domestic violence agencies and described their child(ren)'s experiences of animal maltreatment in the home. Template analysis was used to analyze interview data (KALPHA = .90). Three themes emerged related to children's experiences of animal maltreatment: (a) direct exposure to animal maltreatment and related threats, (b) emotional and behavioral responses to animal maltreatment exposure, and (c) animal maltreatment as coercive control of the child. Results suggest that children's exposure to animal maltreatment is multifaceted and may exacerbate children's risk of negative psychosocial outcomes in the context of co-occurring IPV. Intervention programs designed to assist children exposed to IPV should consider the extent of children's awareness of the abuse of their pets and their strong and deleterious reactions to it.

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Authors' Note

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Keywords

animal abuse; children; trauma; domestic violence

Background

Child exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) is a prevalent public health concern. A recent nationally representative survey reported that approximately 16% of children aged 17 years or younger are exposed to physical IPV during their lifetime (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). Following IPV exposure, children are at risk of an array of short- and long-term social, emotional, and behavioral issues such as posttraumatic stress symptoms and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Sargent, McDonald, Vu, & Jouriles, 2016). In addition, children exposed to IPV are at greater risk of exposure to other traumatic events (e.g., child maltreatment, community violence), which may exacerbate the potentially negative impact of IPV on children's developmental trajectories (Graham-Bermann, Castor, Miller, & Howell, 2012; Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011).

In the past decade, child victimization scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of examining additional forms of violence exposure when evaluating the impact of IPV on child adjustment (e.g., Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Margolin et al., 2009). Yet, despite research indicating that children from IPV-affected homes witness significantly more animal abuse than children from nonviolent families (e.g., Ascione, Weber, Thompson, Maruyama, & Hayashi, 2007; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008), the impact of concomitant exposure to animal maltreatment on child outcomes has been largely ignored in the literature. This is surprising given that 75% of families with children above the age of 6 report the presence of a companion animal in the home (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that pets serve as important emotional and social supports in the lives of children and youth (Kosonen, 1996; Melson, Schwartz, & Beck, 1997). Among studies on the intersection of IPV and animal abuse, Ascione et al. (2007) found that 61.5% of women with children who were residing at a domestic violence (DV) shelter reported that their children had heard or seen pet abuse in the home. When interviewed about their exposure to animal maltreatment, 93% of these children said that they were "very upset" or "sort of upset" as a result of seeing or hearing about the maltreatment of their companion animal (Ascione et al., 2007). This study also examined the rate of children's exposure to animal abuse among women from the community who did not report IPV victimization and, among this subset, only 2.9% of women reported their children being exposed to animal abuse in the home.

McDonald and colleagues expanded on prior studies in this area (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant et al., 2008) by examining the relationship between animal maltreatment exposure and patterns of socioemotional adjustment among 291 children recruited from community-based DV agencies (McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2016). This study found that children who were exposed to animals being hurt or killed in the home were 3.26 times more likely to have moderately compromised patterns of socioemotional

functioning (i.e., borderline clinical levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors) and 5.72 times more likely to have severely compromised patterns of adjustment (i.e., clinical levels of attention problems, social problems, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and callous/unemotional traits) compared with children who were not exposed to concomitant animal maltreatment. Similarly, Girardi and Pozzulo (2015) found support for the potentially deleterious impact of childhood exposure to animal maltreatment in a sample of college undergraduates. The authors reported results of a two-way ANCOVA indicating that among participants who had medium-level bonds with a pet in childhood, those who were exposed to aggression against the animal had significantly higher depression and anxiety scores as adults than those who were not exposed to aggression directed at the pet (Girardi & Pozzulo, 2015). It is important to note, however, that this study did not examine whether participants were exposed to animal maltreatment in the context of IPV.

Girardi and Pozzulo's (2015) and McDonald et al.'s (2016) findings are not surprising given empirical evidence that children experience close bonds with companion animals and rely on pets as a way of managing stress (Melson et al., 1997). In high-stress, unpredictable environments such as households experiencing family violence, exposure to animal abuse may be particularly traumatic for children for whom pets serve as security-providing attachment figures (McDonald et al., 2015; Melson, 2003; Yorke, 2010). Moreover, recent qualitative research suggests that violence in families where animal maltreatment is present is multidirectional and children's exposure to animal maltreatment is often complex, involving violence at the hands of multiple family members with multifarious motives (McDonald et al., 2015). Reporting on qualitative interview data from 58 school-aged (7–12 years) children recruited from residential and nonresidential DV services, McDonald et al. (2015) found three themes across children's accounts of their exposure to animal maltreatment. Most prevalently, children reported experiencing their mother's abusive partner engage in threats and violence against animals to coerce their mother's compliance or retaliate against their mother's actions. Second, children reported animal maltreatment by multiple family members that was intended to punish animals for undesired behaviors (e.g., beating the dog for urinating in the home or chewing shoes). Third, children reported exposure to animal maltreatment at the hands of siblings. When children reported taking action in response to animal maltreatment by their mother's partner, an additional two themes emerged. Children either described (a) directly intervening in incidents of animal maltreatment to protect pets or prevent further harm to the pet, or (b) acting preemptively to preclude the abusive partner's interaction with the pet. Thus, in addition to the emotional, potentially traumatic impact of exposure to companion animal maltreatment, children's heightened risk of becoming directly involved in incidents of animal-directed violence may account for the association between animal maltreatment exposure and compromised psychosocial functioning.

This recent qualitative work sheds light on dynamics of multidirectional violence involving companion animals; however, there are several limitations. Children are unable to report on exposure that occurred early in their development, and their ability to identify animal maltreatment exposure may be limited by their developmental capacities. School-aged children may also underreport or fail to recognize threats to and harm of animals as they normalize and legitimize injury to pets when they perceive justification for the maltreatment

(i.e., the pet was misbehaving and “deserved it”; McDonald et al., 2015). Moreover, this process of identifying and comprehending animal maltreatment experiences may be complicated by children’s desensitization to violence as a result of frequent exposure to interpersonal and animal-directed aggression in households characterized by IPV (Delsol & Margolin, 2004; Falshaw, 2005).

Current Study

Given the limitations of child-centered qualitative research in this area, understanding adult IPV survivors’ knowledge of their children’s exposure to animal maltreatment has the potential to illuminate the processes through which children’s relationships with companion animals influence child risk and resiliency in the context of family violence. In addition, the majority of quantitative studies in this area have utilized dichotomous assessments of childhood exposure to animal maltreatment (exposed vs. nonexposed) and relied on maternal caregiver reports (e.g., Volant et al., 2008) or retrospective accounts of adult participants’ childhood exposure to animal cruelty (e.g., Henry, 2004). Expanding knowledge in this area through qualitative analysis of maternal caregivers’ reports of their children’s exposure has the potential to inform reliable and valid measures to better assess childhood exposure to animal maltreatment. Furthermore, gaining more in-depth knowledge of how children experience maltreatment of pets will help guide the development of holistic conceptual frameworks that accurately describe the multidimensional nature and consequences of children’s polyvictimization in homes experiencing IPV. To date, we are unaware of any qualitative research that has explored caregiver reports of how their children experience animal maltreatment in the context of households affected by IPV. Therefore, this qualitative study explored the following research question in an ethnically diverse sample of IPV survivors:

Research Question 1: How do maternal caregivers convey the ways in which their children experience animal maltreatment in IPV-affected households?

Method

Sample Recruitment

Qualitative data analyzed in this article were collected as part of a larger, mixed-methods phenomenological research study. The overarching study was designed to assess women and children’s experiences of IPV and concomitant animal abuse, and used a concurrent model of data collection (Giorgi, 2009; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Women ($N = 291$) were recruited from 22 DV agencies in a western U.S. state by specific staff members who were trained by the study’s principal investigator or research project director to facilitate the consent/assent process and administer a survey packet comprised of structured and semistructured interviews. Women were eligible to participate in the study if they were above the age of 21 years, had at least one child between the ages of 7 and 12 years, and had a pet living in the home in the last 12 months. Women who had more than one eligible child between the ages of 7 and 12 years were able to select which child participated in the study; women were asked to report on demographic, violence exposure and behavioral information specific to that child.

Sample Description

Of the total sample, 84 women (approximately 29% of participants in the overarching study) indicated that the child participating in the study or another one of her children had seen or heard pets hurt or killed in the home. Of these 84 participants, 65 elected to provide qualitative interview data regarding their child or children's exposure to animal maltreatment. Data from this subset of participants were analyzed for the current study. Women in the qualitative subset represented a range of racial/ethnic identities (58.5% Non-Latina White; 24.6% Hispanic/Latina; 12.3% more than one race; 1.5% African American or Black; 1.5% Asian) and ranged in age from 21 to 56 years ($M = 36.45$, $SD = 7.70$). On average, women reported experiencing IPV for approximately 10 years ($M = 10.07$, $SD = 7.59$). The majority of the participants (61.6%) reported an annual household income less than US\$30,000 (US\$31,000-US\$50,000, 26.1%; >US\$51,000, 7.6%), and maternal education level was distributed as follows: 21.6%, less than high school diploma; 30.8%, high school diploma; 32.3%, some college; 10.8%, bachelor's degree; and 3.1%, master's degree. Across participants, the number of children in the household ranged from 1 to 5 ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.16$); the number of pets ranged from 1 to 10, with an average of 3.15 pets per household ($SD = 6.69$). Some percentages reflect missing data.

Children—Participant mothers provided demographic information about their child participating in the study. Forty-three percent of children were girls and 57% were boys. The mean age of children in the sample was 8.97 ($SD = 1.52$). The percentages of racial and ethnic identities of the children mostly mirrored those of their mothers (Non-Latina/o White, 46.2%; Latino or Hispanic, 21.5%; African American or Black, 1.5%; Asian or American Indian, 1.5%) with the exception of those identified as having more than one racial/ethnic identity (29.2%). Approximately 76.9% of child participants were the biological child of the abusive partner. (Maternal, child, and partner demographic data were ascertained from a demographic survey completed by the mother.)

Interview Procedures

All interviews were conducted in a private space at the DV agency where the participant received services. Interview procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects and designed to support participants who were coping with traumatic events. Therefore, audio and video data were not collected to enhance anonymity and confidentiality as well as minimize risks and additional stress. To promote choice and respect preferences, participants had the option of writing their responses on a printed form of the survey or having the interviewer administer the measure verbally and record responses on the printed form. When participants elected to have their responses recorded by the interviewer, survey administrators were instructed to write down the exact words of the participants. Across interviews, participant responses were typically succinct, and none of the survey administrators reported difficulty recording the exact words and phrases of the participants. Fifteen percent of the interviews were conducted in Spanish by a trained interviewer who was bilingual in Spanish and English. A professional translator provided English translations of the qualitative data from surveys completed in Spanish. Participant mothers were compensated US\$65 following the interview.

Measure—Qualitative data reported in this article reflect participant responses to one semistructured survey administered as part of the interview schedule for the larger study. Specifically, participants' qualitative responses to the 28-item Pet Treatment Survey (PTS; Ascione, 2011) were used in the current analysis. The PTS is a measure that was designed purposefully for our study and expands upon the Battered Partner Shelter Survey—Pet Maltreatment Assessment (BPSS; Ascione & Weber, 1996). Specifically, the PTS was designed to assess experiences of maltreatment and care of companion animals in the context of IPV-affected households as reported by women accessing residential or nonresidential DV services. The measure includes close-ended and open-ended questions pertaining to the following areas: past pet ownership history, past veterinary care of pets, treatment of animals in the household, responses to animal maltreatment, the impact of concern for animals on women's decisions to leave or stay with a partner, child exposure to animal maltreatment, and changes in their partner's use of violence.

The current study was specifically focused on participants' responses to the following open-ended questions on the PTS: (a) Has your child who will be completing questionnaires for the study ever seen or heard pets killed in the home? and (b) Have any of your other children seen or heard pets hurt or killed in your home? When items reflecting children's exposure to animal maltreatment were endorsed, the survey (or interviewer, when verbally administered) invited the participant to provide additional information with the following statement: "Please describe the incident(s) as you remember in as much detail as possible." The words, "when-where-how-why," were also provided as prompts to guide responses. Given that participants were able to provide written or verbal responses to other open-ended PTS questions about their partner and child(ren)'s care of pets, their child(ren)'s perpetration of animal cruelty, and how concern for pets influenced their decision to stay with or leave an abusive partner, qualitative responses to these questions were also analyzed; their accounts of other types of pet treatments and safety planning provided important contextual information needed to gain a holistic understanding of their child(ren)'s experiences of animal maltreatment in the home. Participants' responses to these inquiries were provided before and after questions pertaining to their children's exposure to animal harm. A list of the qualitative PTS questions, and the sequence in which they were asked, is provided in Table 1.

Analysis

Atlas-ti (version 7.5.10) was used to conduct template analysis (King, 1998, 2012), an approach regularly used in social science research to guide descriptive inquiry and thematic analysis of large qualitative data sets. This method of organizing and analyzing qualitative interviews is well matched to phenomenologically oriented research designs (Brooks & King, 2012; King, 1998), and therefore aligns with the overarching design of our study. Following guidelines provided by King and colleagues (Brooks & King, 2012; King, 1998), template analysis allows the researcher to pursue open coding guided by a set of foci pertaining to the research question(s) or to evaluate observed data alongside a theoretically predicted template of a priori codes (King, 2012).

Qualitative Analytic Steps

Step 1—First, the second and third authors developed an a priori template consisting of codes specifically drawn from the PTS interview questions. These codes were adapted and defined with inclusion and exclusion criteria based on empirical literature pertaining to the types of threats and violence toward animals that occur within IPV-affected families (e.g., harm to animals as a power/control tactic, animal punishment or discipline) as well as children's responses to and strategies for coping with family violence (e.g., emotional impact of witnessing violence, child involvement in violent incidents). Next, the same two authors independently read through 10 randomly selected transcripts and coded units of data that were captured by the list of a priori codes. For example, segments of interview data that met the established criteria for the a priori code "Emotional Impact on Child" were coded as such, as exemplified in the following quote:

Yes, my daughter always watched when my husband was beating the dog. She would run up and grab the dog and hug him and cry with him.

Step 2—Next, a peer debriefing (Padgett, 2008) session involving the first four authors was held. From this process, additional codes were developed to identify experiences that were not represented in the first template. In addition, the a priori codes were further demarcated after the review of additional empirical literature. Following template revisions, the first three authors independently analyzed 10 additional transcripts and met to compare codes along with the fourth author. As a result of the second peer debriefing session, minor modifications were made to the codes to improve the researchers' coding reliability and resolve parallel coding issues that emerged when data segments represented overlapping areas of the template (Brooks & King, 2012). This process of independent coding followed by peer debriefing was repeated for two more iterations until a final coding scheme of a priori and emergent codes was developed.

Step 3—Following this iterative process, the second and third authors applied the final template of 44 codes to the entire set of interviews. During this phase, the coders were not forced to assign a specific number of cases to each category. Subsequently, 10% of the coded interviews were selected at random, and Krippendorff's alpha was computed using the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT; Lu & Shulman, 2008) to assess the reliability of the two coders' application of the final template. This analysis resulted in Krippendorff's alpha of .90, which is indicative of excellent interrater reliability.

Steps 4 and 5—After reliably applying the final coding template to all interview transcripts, the first three authors examined the data for saturation and confirmed that each code was present across multiple interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consistent with the process of grounded, inductive analysis, codes appearing in the final template were then assessed for commonalities, differences, and thematic content patterns (Boyatzis, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As a result of this process, final themes were identified by the first three authors and confirmed by consensus of the research team.

Results

Theme 1: Direct Exposure to Partner's Animal Maltreatment and Related Threats

Participants frequently ($n = 59$; 90.7% of sample) reported that children in the household experienced animal maltreatment through direct exposure to threats and violence against animals, which emerged as a notable theme in the data. As reported by participants, children were often present as observers in close proximity to violence and threats against their companion animals. In addition, firearms or household objects were often mentioned in the context of threats against pets or used as weapons to harm the animal. Examples of child proximity to animal maltreatment and related exposure to weapons are demonstrated in the following quotes¹:

My partner will hit and throw the cat—they [the children] saw that.

He has threatened to shoot the dog or make the dog disappear in front of the children—especially if dog walked into kitchen.

She has seen her dog kicked, beaten, and choked many, many times. He chokes him with the leash. He has held him up high with the leash so he can't breathe.

Notably, mothers also reported that some children witnessed the abusive partner kill companion animals in addition to their exposure to threats and/or harm:

[Daughter] also saw kitten being killed and heard Lab [dog] yelping from being hurt.

In some responses, women commented on the age of children at the time of exposure, with several mothers indicating that children in the household had been in direct proximity to animal maltreatment early on in their development:

The dog had multiple cracked teeth from him [child's father] punching her in the face. He would stand on the dog's neck and stomp her ribs. He would pick her up with her excess skin and swing her over his head and slam her back on the ground.... He would lock cats in kennel and shake it. The dog had a litter and he broke one of the puppies paws by throwing it. He would rub the dog's snout in her pee until her nose was raw. He would make the dog eat her own fecal matter if she went in the house.... She [daughter] was in the room—a foot from him—during a lot of the [animal] abuse. She was a toddler when most of it was happening.

Las niñas mas chiquitas han visto cuando su papa avienta contra la pared el gato. Solo porque está enojado. [The youngest of the girls have seen their dad throwing cat against the wall. Just because he is angry.]

In addition, while some women relayed that they had personally observed their child's exposure to animal maltreatment, others noted that children had reported directly witnessing animal maltreatment at times when their mother was not present. For example, one woman noted,

¹Identifying information such as names of pets and family members has been replaced. Clarifying information is provided in parentheses and brackets.

My abuser got mad at our cat when it was a kitten and threw a softball at its face.
My son just recently told me about this incident.

Theme 2: Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Exposure

Maternal caregivers ($n = 14$; 21.54% of sample) also discussed children's emotional and behavioral responses to witnessing a companion animal harmed by their partner. Women recounted that children felt extreme emotional distress and/or experienced negative emotions (e.g., sadness) when coping with maltreatment of their pet:

She [daughter] saw my partner kick his dog with his boots on. She was devastated.
[Other children in the household] heard [my] partner threaten to hurt dog. [The children] observed him hit, kick, and throw [the dog] out the door.

Several quotes related to this theme indicated that the child responded physiologically to the emotional stress by crying during or after such incidents:

Hace 8 meses a visto a su papa cuando llego a casa y lo avento la piso en la casa cuando el nino llego y saco al perro afuera y comenzo a llorar. [Eight months ago, he saw his dad coming home and throwing the dog on the floor in the house, so the boy came by and took the dog outside and began to cry.]

In addition, this theme illustrates that witnessing a pet being maltreated not only led to an emotional response in children but also influenced some children to take action to protect the pet or intervene during incidents of violence against the animal:

Si mi hija siempre miraba cuando mi esposo le pegaba. Ella corria y agarraba el perro y lo abrazaba y lloraba con el. Hace 5 meses el le pegaba al perro y mi hijo mayor lo vio y empeso a defender el perro. [Yes, my daughter always watched when my husband was beating the dog. She would run up and grab the dog and hug him and cry with him. Five months ago, he [abusive partner] beat the dog and my oldest son saw it and started to defend the dog.]

[Child] would clean up and hide [pets] "accidents" from partner. Most recent—1 month ago.

Some children attempted to actively intervene in severe animal maltreatment involving the use of weapons and at risk to themselves:

The recent incident I heard about, my abuser shooting the dogs in the butt. My son would try to stop him, then my abuser would choke my son for interfering.

Finally, one participant noted that her child's distress related to the maltreatment of his pets was further exacerbated by safety-related separation from the animals, as follows:

I did not have anywhere to go and when I went into a shelter they did not allow pets, so, since my son was crying for the pets, I returned home until I had enough money to rent an apartment.

Theme 3: Animal Maltreatment as Coercive Control of Child

Several women ($n = 8$; 12.30% of the sample) reported that their children's exposure to animal maltreatment resulted from their partner's use of threats and violence against animals as a tactic to coerce child compliance. While less prevalent in the data, this emerged as an important theme:

There have been times he threatened but didn't kill a pet. If the kids weren't doing something he wanted them to do. He would threaten the pets. The pets would disappear. One day they had ferrets and one day they were gone. For example, he would say he was taking them to the vet and the animal would not come home. "Chicken-wise" he would tell the girls he would "cut the chicken's heads off"...

Last year, he was upset that our son was carrying the cat like a baby and asked him to put him down and my son cried so he grabbed the cat by his mouth and threw him out the window. Told my son that the next time he needs to listen.

When my girls, whom are not his, play with the dog it makes him angry so he will threaten to squeeze the dog with his hand until dead unless they leave him alone.

Such quotes demonstrate that abusive partners were aware of the bond children in the household shared with companion animals and exploited children's relationships with pets to punish them for their actions, and/or compel future compliance. In some cases, animal maltreatment was used as a coercive tactic to influence the child and mother jointly/simultaneously. One woman stated,

Every time when he gets mad, he says that as he bought it [the mouse] and pays for everything that he is going to cook and eat it, if we do not listen.

Discussion

This study of a multiethnic sample of pet-owning women and their school-aged children provides unique information on the extent of animal abuse and children's reactions to it within households where IPV is present. While 29% of mothers from the larger study reported that at least one of their children had witnessed the abuse or killing of a pet, this figure is lower than that found by Ascione et al. (2007) who reported a prevalence rate of 61.5%. It should be noted that Ascione studied women residing in shelters, whereas the current study included women residing in the community; in addition, 5% of participants in the overarching study (15 of 291) chose not to disclose whether children were exposed to animal abuse in the home. Moreover, inclusion criteria for the current study specified that mothers must have a child in the 7 to 12 years age range, whereas Ascione et al. (2007) did not specify children's current ages. The lower rate of animal maltreatment in our study may also be attributed to the ethnic diversity among our participants. In particular, our sample was characterized by a greater representation of Latino participants (24%) than those reported in Ascione et al.'s (2007) study (12%). Thus, the lower frequency of children's exposure to animal maltreatment is not surprising given recent findings noting that U.S.-born or Mexican-born Hispanic IPV perpetrators are less likely to perpetrate animal harm than non-Hispanic, U.S.-born IPV perpetrators (Hartman, Hageman, Williams, & Ascione, 2015).

The template analysis of the qualitative data in the present study revealed that the main theme of participants' responses (occurring in approximately 91% of the interviews) involved children's close proximity to physical harm or injury to animals at the hands of the mother's abusive partner. Mothers' descriptions of the methods of pet abuse engaged in by their violent partner parallel the violent tactics that IPV perpetrators may use against their adult partners (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015). That is, women in our study recounted pets being mistreated by threats to kill or harm, and kicking, punching, strangling, and the use of guns and other weapons. The theme of children's proximity to animal maltreatment is consistent with prior qualitative research on children's self-reports of exposure to animal maltreatment, which has documented children's direct exposure to animal maltreatment in the context of violent interparental conflict as well as incidents when animals are harshly punished for undesired behaviors (McDonald et al., 2015). It is important to note that directly witnessing (seeing) interparental violence puts children at greater risk of compromised developmental outcomes than indirect exposure such as being told about violent acts or seeing the affective or environmental aftereffects of violence (Hamby et al., 2011). If the increased impact of direct exposure also applies to children's experiences of witnessing animal abuse, the high rate of children's direct exposure to animal abuse reported in this study is concerning, and this form of violence exposure warrants attention when assessing childhood polyvictimization.

The current study, when examined alongside earlier qualitative work, highlights the importance of considering both maternal and child reports when assessing child exposure to animal maltreatment. For example, a few mothers reported that they were not present when their child witnessed acts of animal harm perpetrated by their abusive partner; the mothers learned about the animal maltreatment at a later time, when the child recounted the event to them. This finding underscores the value of examining children's reports of their personal experiences in homes characterized by IPV (Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007). It is important to note, however, that IPV perpetrators sometimes threaten children with harm or other negative consequences to prevent children from disclosing abuse (Øverlien, 2010). In addition, children may feel guilt and shame surrounding the abuse of a pet. As a result, children may underreport animal abuse exposure when participating in research as well as refrain from telling caregivers about their experiences.

Some participants noted that their children were exposed to severe acts of violence against animals early on in life (i.e., toddlerhood). Research highlights the importance of understanding the timing and chronicity of traumatic events in childhood when considering their potential impact on developmental trajectories. It is unlikely that school-aged children, adolescents, and adults who are asked about their childhood experiences of animal maltreatment and related threats would be able to accurately recall such early, but potentially significant, experiences (Howe, Courage, & Peterson, 1994). Therefore, caregivers' reports of their child's exposure to animal maltreatment are important to consider, particularly in research and practice aiming to address early traumatic experiences.

The second most common theme, mentioned by about 20% of the mothers, was their child's emotional and/or behavioral response to the maltreatment of their pets. Similar to findings reported in other studies (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007), women represented by this theme

described observing or hearing about their child's fear, sadness, worry, emotional dysregulation, and "devastation." Just as when witnessing adult IPV, watching harm to a pet can be terrorizing to a child given the special role that pets play in providing both emotional and social support to children (Kosonen, 1996; Melson et al., 1997). Witnessing pet abuse may also threaten the child's sense of security and attachment to their pets, which is especially troubling as children often turn to their pets for consolation and affection during times of stress (Melson et al., 1997). During incidents when violence against animals occurs, this emotional coping resource is taken away altogether. Notably, a child's negative emotional response to being separated from an abused pet may be so intense that mothers factor it into their safety planning, as seen in our sample ("... when I went into a shelter they did not allow pets, so, since my son was crying for the pets, I returned home until I had enough money to rent an apartment."). Safety plans that do not include maintaining a child's access to their pet(s) may further exacerbate the emotional distress resulting from exposure to animal maltreatment and IPV, which is particularly concerning given the dearth of DV shelters in the United States that allow pets (Krienert, Walsh, Matthews, & McConkey, 2012).

Regarding children's behavioral responses to seeing or hearing pets being threatened or harmed with violence, some mothers noted that their child took preemptive protective actions or tried to protect their pets during the abuse; some children also comforted the pet following the incident ("She would run up and grab the dog and hug him and cry with him"). This finding is also consistent with prior qualitative research documenting themes of preventive protection of pets and direct intervention to protect pets among children's narratives of their animal maltreatment experiences (i.e., McDonald et al., 2015). While children exposed to IPV may not feel responsible for causing violent behavior, they frequently feel responsible for stopping violence (DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011) and intervene as a type of problem-focused coping (Kerig, 2011). Moreover, children often intervene in the highest risk IPV situations (Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemester, 2003). Jouriles, Rosenfield, McDonald, & Mueller (2014) noted the importance of accounting for children's involvement in their parents' conflicts when considering the impact of exposure to IPV on child outcomes as child involvement in interparental conflict is associated with child adjustment problems (i.e., internalizing and externalizing problems), even when controlling for exposure to physical IPV. Children may be more likely to intervene in violent incidents involving companion animals with whom they experience a close bond, putting them at increased risk for maladjustment than IPV-exposed children who do not experiencing co-occurring abuse of companion animals. While intervening in an incident of animal maltreatment is an understandable reaction following the abuse of a pet to whom the child is attached, the act of intervening additionally puts children at risk of accidental and/or targeted violence themselves. As some mothers noted, a child's efforts to protect a pet from the abusive partner resulted in the partner using violence against the child to punish the child's efforts to intervene ("My abuser would choke my son for interfering").

Finally, the last theme in our data pertained to children experiencing animal maltreatment as a tactic used by their father or mother's partner to coerce the child's compliance. While only 12% of participants are represented in this theme, it is an important finding given that it arose despite women not having been directly asked how their partners influenced children

via the treatment of animals in the home. Within IPV, coercive control is theorized to arise from the perpetrator's sense of entitlement to dictate rules and behavior, and to enforce such rules through an array of ubiquitous verbally, emotionally, and psychologically abusive tactics that may be periodically punctuated by physical violence (Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012; Stark, 2007). In addition to coercion in the context of IPV, coercive parenting among fathers who engage in aggressive behaviors with partners is well documented (Fox & Benson, 2004). The role of pets in coercive parenting is relatively absent from the literature, however, and may be important to consider more comprehensively in research and practice. Children who are subject to coercive control may experience disempowerment frequently or daily, and across multiple domains of their life (Katz, 2016). It is likely that child relationships with animals are compromised in such contexts, which may have acute implications for child threat perceptions and emotional security (Jouriles & McDonald, 2015; Renner, 2012). Moreover, exposure to coercive parenting during childhood has been noted as a family-of-origin factor related to future IPV perpetration (Schwartz, Hage, Bush, & Burns, 2006). Thus, being exposed to animal maltreatment in this manner during childhood may influence children differently than exposure to animal maltreatment that is used to coerce a nonabusing caregiver or punish an animal.

Altogether, the three themes that emerged from our data give insight into recent findings regarding the predictive impact of animal abuse exposure on child and adult outcomes. The deleterious impact of childhood exposure to an IPV perpetrator's maltreatment of animals may be related to the offender's characteristics, such as the use of severe abuse tactics (e.g., use of weapons; Ascione et al., 2007; DeGue, 2011; Simmons & Lehmann, 2007) or the use of coercive parenting tactics that lead to and/or exacerbate child isolation and disempowerment (Katz, 2016). Moreover, the deleterious impact of exposure to animal abuse in households where IPV is present may be due to and/or exacerbated by the distress children experience when witnessing animal mistreatment; disrupted attachments with pets; and/or the child's compromised emotional coping strategies (i.e., lack of access to the pet as a soothing affect regulation source during violent episodes). Furthermore, problem-focused coping attempts to intervene and stop the abuse may put children at risk of accidental or purposeful injury. Finally, the meaning children attach to animal maltreatment may mediate the impact of exposure to threats against and/or harm of pets, especially among children who experience a heightened sense of responsibility to care for their animal and feel responsible for the perpetrator's violence.

Limitations

This study relies on the recollections of mothers of children whose pets have been harmed or abused. As such, it is retrospective and depends on self-report. Still, mothers are in a unique position to give details of violent events that take place within the family. The rigor of our study could have been improved by expanding on the method of writing down responses to include recorded interviews that were available for transcription of nonverbal communication and emotional content. In addition, a major limitation centers on the use of the PTS to obtain information on whether children in the home had seen or heard pets hurt or killed. The survey is designed to examine a large number of content areas pertaining to treatment of pets; as such, child exposure to animal maltreatment is only a small focus of the

measure, and these questions group inquiry regarding exposure to hurting *and* killing of pets together in one question. This approach may have influenced participants to only elaborate on one event rather than describe harm-specific and killing incidents in two separate responses. It is reasonable to assume that there may be important thematic distinctions to be made between narratives on harm to pets and killing of pets that went unexplored in our sample due to the PTS's format. In addition, there are a number of additional and alternative questions that might have been asked to greatly elucidate the issue of child exposure to threats and harm against animals, as it is likely that children are exposed to a wider array of animal-involved coercive control behaviors. As noted by Katz (2016), questions phrased around the concept of coercive control rather than the "physical incident model" can help provide information that is consistent with children's lived realities and help better inform practice that comprehensively supports children's needs.

Future Studies

Clearly, given recent scholarship advocating for the importance of examining children's polyvictimization, an important issue to explore in future studies is the extent and effects of concomitant pet and child abuse experiences within families with IPV. Given the findings of our study, it would also be useful to know the intensity, frequency, and duration of children's exposure to animal maltreatment, how early in the life of the child the pet abuse started, and whether they were exposed to more than one pet being harmed. Furthermore, future research should examine the extent of the child's involvement in pet abuse incidents. As previously noted, a small body of quantitative research reports that childhood exposure to animal abuse is associated with compromised socioemotional adjustment among school-aged children (McDonald et al., 2016) as well as anxiety and depression in adulthood (Girardi & Pozzulo, 2015). Our findings suggest that future research should also explore how the type of animal maltreatment to which children are exposed (e.g., animal maltreatment to coerce children, animal maltreatment to coerce the nonabusing caregiver, physical punishment of animals) influences child well-being. Moreover, research is needed to examine how children's proximity, severity, and frequency of exposure to animal maltreatment affect child adjustment (i.e., trauma symptoms, behavior problems, and future perpetration of animal maltreatment and IPV) with specific attention to the role of timing, chronicity, and child involvement in these events. Finally, future research should explore if the meaning children attach to animal abuse incidents moderates or mediates the relationship between animal abuse exposure and socioemotional outcomes among children in households characterized by family violence.

Clinical Implications

Only a small proportion of IPV shelters (approximately 6%) offer pet-sheltering or pet-fostering services (Krienert et al., 2012). Our findings suggest that safe sheltering for family pets and the ability of a child to have access to a family pet after entering shelter have significant implications for keeping families safe and fostering children's coping and adjustment. From a clinical perspective, results of the present study highlight the extent of children's awareness of the abuse of their pets and their strong and deleterious reactions to it. These findings suggest that clinicians need to explore the extent to which children witness the harm or injury that is done to pets, as well as children's coping responses, to assess for

the effects of such exposure on their well-being. In particular, clinicians or advocates who work with child survivors of IPV or in IPV shelters can use such information to consider the trauma children may experience above and beyond witnessing the IPV itself. It is important to consider that children's bonding with the pets may include identification with the pet as a less powerful family member, similar to themselves (Melson, 2003), and may render the exposure to animal maltreatment as damaging as witnessing violence toward other adults or children in the household (McDonald et al., 2016; Renner, 2012).

Intervention programs designed to assist children exposed to IPV might include the issue of animal maltreatment as one more way in which violence may take place in the family, to better help the child to discuss fears and worries associated with IPV and to learn effective problem-focused coping strategies that do not place them in harm's way. In addition, animal-assisted therapy with such children can provide an excellent inroad to emotional healing for the child who may be able to develop self-soothing skills via learning to soothe and talk to the animal about the experience during the therapy sessions (Fine, 2015; O'Haire, Guérin, & Kirkham, 2015). Given that children exposed to animal abuse are more likely to perpetuate violence against animals in childhood and adulthood (Petersen & Farrington, 2007; Tallichet & Hensley, 2004), humane education programs that foster positive attitudes and compassionate behavior toward animals may have particularly important interventive implications for children dually exposed to animal abuse and IPV.

Finally, our findings have implications for intake and assessment procedures that extend to allied professions beyond those who specifically serve families affected by IPV. Professionals working with children and families should be alert to the fact that child reports of animal abuse may signal a larger issue of IPV in the home. Disclosures of animal maltreatment exposure may become evident indirectly through play therapy with younger children, or may be signaled when a child's perpetration of animal maltreatment is the focus of clinical intervention. In such cases, efforts to help the anxious child cope or change the child's animal maltreating behavior will be thwarted as long as the child continues to be exposed to IPV and the concomitant abuse of pets by the adult perpetrator in the home.

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Elizabeth A. Collins, MSW, is the Advocacy Director at the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV). She provides support to the Coalition's member organizations and engages in efforts to improve statewide responses for people who have experienced domestic violence. Before joining CCADV in 2008, she had the privilege of working directly with survivors of domestic abuse for 7 years in shelter and community settings. She has particular interest in empowerment-based advocacy, trauma-informed services, batterers as parents, and addressing the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment.

Anna Maternick is a social work doctoral student at VCU. She earned an MS in social research at Hunter College, CUNY, in 2012, where she collaborated on qualitative research related to human trafficking. Specifically, she was involved in research focused on potential vulnerabilities to and impacts of victimization and sexual exploitation. As a graduate research assistant at VCU, she is currently collaborating on a mixed-methods study that examines how potentially traumatic experiences of intimate partner violence and animal maltreatment affect children. Her research interests include policies pertaining to prevention of trauma and victimization for children and young people.

Nicole Nicotera, PhD, is an associate professor of social work at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW). She applies her expertise in qualitative and mixed methodologies to research topics that include promotion of health and well-being across the life span; the role of risk, protection, and resilience in health; civic engagement and mindfulness practices as pathways to well-being; measuring civic development and engagement; interventions to enhance civic leadership and positive youth development; and issues of unearned privilege and oppression in social work practice, education, and research.

Sandra Graham-Bermann, PhD, is professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She has developed new measures of children's fears and worries, traumatic stress, attitudes and beliefs about violence, family stereotyping, and conflict in sibling relationships. She has also designed and evaluated interventions for women and children exposed to domestic violence using randomized controlled trials. These interventions have been adopted for use in 28 states and five countries. She is a coeditor of *How Intimate Partner Violence Affects Children: Developmental Research, Case Studies, and Evidence-Based Treatment* (2011), APA Books.

Frank R. Ascione, PhD, is an internationally renowned researcher and author who has conducted research related to humane education, children's attitudes toward animals, and child and adolescent animal abuse. His research on animal abuse examines the common roots of violence toward people and animals, and is directed at identifying an early indicator of at-risk status in children. He served as the inaugural American Humane Endowed Chair and Executive Director of the Institute for Human-Animal Connection at the University of

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James Herbert Williams, PhD, is dean and Milton Morris Endowed Chair at the GSSW at the University of Denver. He holds his MSW from Smith College, MPA from the University of Colorado, and PhD in social welfare from the University of Washington. His research and publications focus on human security and economic sustainability, health promotion and disease prevention, health equity, sustainable development, mental health services for African American children in urban schools, violence prevention, and community strategies for positive youth development. His scholarship has been published in several prominent journals.

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Table 1

Qualitative Interview Questions on the PTS.

Item	Qualitative Interview Question
7	Has your partner helped care for your pets? If yes, please describe the type of care provided.
8	Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as possible (when-where-how-why).
11	Has your partner ever actually hurt or killed one of your pets? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able (when-where-how-why).
15	Did anyone call the police or humane society (or animal control) to report that the animal was threatened or hurt or killed? If yes, who made the call? Who was called (police, humane society, animal control)? What was their response?
16	Have you ever hurt or killed one of your pets? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able (when-where-how-why).
17	Does your child, who will be completing the questionnaires for this study, help care for your pets? If yes, please describe the type of care given.
18	Has your child, who will be completing the questionnaire for this study, ever seen or heard pets hurt or killed in your home? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able (when-where-how-why).
19	Has the child you have chosen to complete the questionnaire ever hurt or killed one of your pets? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able (when-where-how-why).
21	Do your other children help care for your pets? If yes, please describe the type of care given.
22	Have any of your other children ever seen or heard pets hurt or killed in your home? If so, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able (when-where-how-why).
23	Have any of your other children ever hurt or killed one of your pets? Please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as possible (when-where-how-why).
25	(Residential services): Did concern over your pet's welfare keep you from coming to this shelter sooner than now? If yes, please explain. (Nonresidential): Does concern over your pet's welfare affect your decision making about staying with or leaving your partner? If yes, please explain.
28	Are there any other pet or animal-related issues you would like to describe (e.g., treatment of farm animals, wild animals, strays)? If yes, please describe the incident(s) in as much detail as you are able.

Note. PTS = Pet Treatment Survey.