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### **Animals as disregarded pawns in family violence: exclusionary practices Of feminist based refuge policies**

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#### **Abstract**

Commonly agreed upon is the relationship between family violence and violence toward nonhuman animals. Workers in the field of family violence also acknowledge that women may delay leaving a violent home due to loyalty to their nonhuman counterparts, and because refuge policies often do not allow them to accompany humans into safe shelter. The recent work of Clifton Flynn has indicated the relationship between nonhuman animals and human animals to be one of responsive interaction, with theoretical analyses most often based upon Goffman's theory of symbolic interaction. Despite literature indicating the level of harm inflicted upon nonhuman family members in violent homes, and requests from women and children that they accompany them to safe shelter, refuge policies often negate the possibility of this occurring. This article critiques the feminist ideals on which refuge policies are based, and in doing so, argues that justice is denied to nonhuman animals. Their existence in the violent home is maintained by lack of choices available to their human counterpart, and is enforced by feminist ideals, which are ironically based upon equity. Unless feminist principles are challenged, nonhuman family members will continue to be denied justice in violent families where escape is the only option to ensure safety.

#### **Introduction**

Taking up Flynn's (2000a) challenge to sociology in ending specieism, this paper critiques the feminist ideals on which many Australian refuge policies are based which ultimately limit the inclusion of nonhuman family members. Expanding Flynn's (2000a, 2000c) work on symbolic interactionism, this paper aims for a

deeper understanding of the complexities of relationships between nonhuman individuals dependent upon adult humans for safety and nurture. Most importantly, this paper mounts a theoretical challenge to re-work current refuge policies, and in doing so, raises questions about the impact of feminism upon the lack of choices available to women and children when attempting to remove nonhuman family members from the violent home.

## Existing literature

An increasing amount of literature since the late 1990s has indicated correlations between the existence of nonhuman animal abuse and family violence (Arkow 1996; Baldry 2005; Becker and French 2004; Cain 1983; Kogen et al 2004; Flynn 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Feldman 1997), with many suggesting that violence toward nonhuman animals is primarily done by children or youths, and is likely to be a precursor to family violence (Ascione 1998; Beirne 1999; Flynn 1999b), or even murder (Wickens 1998). However Bierne (2004) challenges arguments based on the progression thesis such as these, suggesting them to be lacking methodological and conceptual clarity. Similarly, Piper (2003) argues that a progression thesis assumes children, as victims of family violence, become perpetrators and are thus predictable and appropriate targets for prior diagnosis. It may be argued that these oversimplified arguments have the potential to not only prompt moral panic, but also to maintain the nonhuman counterpart as an object, instead of a subject within the experience of violence.

The gendered nature of violence toward nonhumans is also represented within literature (Flynn 1999a), with most represented by feminist studies (Renzetti 1992; Yllo 1993). However Browne's work (1997) suggests that violence toward nonhuman family members is also likely to be inflicted by females, although Browne's work maintains the nature of gendered blame as to women's violence.

Many studies have also focused on the use of animals as 'tools' within the actions of family violence (Kogen et al 2004; Flynn 1999a, 1999b), however the later work of Flynn (2000a; 2000b; 2000c) indicates a shift toward exploring symbolic interactionism and the movement of the nonhuman family member to the centre of analysis as participant, rather than decontextualising them as within much of the family violence literature. According to conventional sociology, because of the critical role of language in interaction, symbolic interaction was considered impossible for nonhumans. However the work of Flynn (2000a), followed Sanders (1993,1999) and Alger and Alger (1997,1999), and presented evidence to challenge that notion. Whilst occasionally reverting to progression thesis concerning targets for addressing family violence, Flynn's (2000a) work identifies the importance of roles of nonhuman family members, especially within violent families. Flynn argued that nonhuman family members, similar to humans, construct reality through their interactions. Acting symbolically, nonhumans take on roles in context of their lived situation: symbolic interactionism informs the analyses of the roles of nonhumans in violent relationships.

Theoretically rejecting Mead's (1934) argument concerning an inability for

linguistic communication between human and nonhumans, Flynn (2000a) suggested that animals are interactive, responsive, and recognise the rules and roles that govern relationships between them and human counterparts. Of most interest is Flynn's work with women who had recently entered a refuge after fleeing their violent partner, in which women were questioned about the role of nonhuman companions within their life. Flynn's (2000a) work reinforces my anecdotal experiences as a former family violence refuge worker, that many women delay leaving their abusive partner due to concern for the safety and welfare of their nonhuman companions. Even after leaving, women continue to express concern about their nonhuman companions and attempt to locate a residence after leaving the refuge that would allow them to have all members of their family living with them -including their nonhuman members. Due to the significance of nonhuman's roles within the family, Flynn indicates that it is critical for professionals not to minimise the importance of relationships between both nonhuman and human family members (2000a). His work identified the important role that nonhuman family members have within families, including the role of 'supporter' of human counterparts, and the context in which nonhumans are responsive to violence. The rich data that Flynn's study produced offers the researcher exploring specieism not only a baseline from which to address policies enforcing unjust treatment of nonhumans, but also a framework from which to critique policies that impact upon them.

## **Theoretical critique**

However Flynn's analysis of interaction between nonhumans and humans is limited in ability to critique feminist policies within refuges: being based upon a traditional feminist perspective of violence, it unquestioningly accepts that patriarchy is at the basis of family violence. I argue that this assumes the dichotomy of the male perpetrator who is biologically predisposed for aggression, and the female victim who is alternatively biologically predisposed for nurture, and is by nature unable to change this experience of victim. Patriarchy also assumes that violence is caused by power and control within society, however many forms of violence cannot be placed onto the power and control theory. For instance, lesbians (Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002) have studied violence within lesbian relationships and demonstrate that arguments of patriarchy are incomplete when considering violence. Further, theories of patriarchy argue that it is the male in society who is exerting power over the females and/or children in order to gain control. If this theory is also applied to the violent male once his partner and children escape the home and leave the nonhuman in the home, the absence of the target of power enforcement would suggest that there is no longer any control sought, and therefore the nonhuman family member is safe.

Further, to consider the violent male as using the nonhuman as a 'tool' to exert control over the female, means that once the female is in hiding in refuge, the male has no reason to use the nonhuman as a 'tool' for violence, also suggesting the nonhuman to be safe at this point. I suggest this not to be the case. Therefore, the theories of Flynn (2000a, 2000c) require expansion to consider the nonhuman and the family as a whole entity, considering the

symbolic relationship with the perpetrator of violence, along with what is keeping the nonhuman in the violent home. At this point it is clear that using patriarchy as a theory, focuses the argument upon a 'cause' of violence, however it is clear that causes of family violence are multiple (Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2006; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002). It is much more useful to use Flynn's application of symbolic interactionism to challenge feminism to critique their own theories as the basis of refuge policy.

Whilst Flynn's previous work has recommended strategies for workers and encouraging more explorations of the relationship between human and nonhuman family members in regards to violence, it has stopped short of encouraging social change. This may be due to his reliance on patriarchy within his theoretical work, which leaves little room for encouraging change at the grassroots level. However creating change for nonhumans requires work on a more fundamental level than that of worker practices: that of policy formation on which workers base their decisions and implement refuge procedures. Taking up this role, I challenge the feminist ideals on which many refuge policies are based. Feminism, as the framework for equity and inclusionary practices, ironically upholds the exclusion of nonhuman family members by denying their entry to safe houses. Without alternative choices for the women and children to escape the violent home, the exclusionist policies of the refuges must be accepted for them to enter safe refuge.

## **Family violence refuges and nonhuman counterparts**

In 1996, Arkow raised the possibility of providing temporary housing for nonhumans while their human counterparts are in refuges, through a teaming of 'animal shelters' and refuges such as that demonstrated in California, United States of America (USA). Since that time, various pilot programs have been documented (Howard and Van Boven 1997; Kogan et al 2004; Wickens 1998), seemingly through improved communication between social service, health, animal welfare, education, and law enforcement organizations. This represents the model of service provision where many more refuge service providers are teaming with entities such as RSPCA (Domestic Violence Connect 2006), however many of these services are limited to 28 days. Providing accommodation for nonhuman family members becomes particularly important considering that some women delay coming to the refuge since they cannot bring their nonhuman companions with them. Ascione (1998) suggests that by offering the provision for women to check on their nonhuman counterparts, all family members may benefit. Suggestions have been raised that these partnerships may also provide much needed medical care for the nonhumans (Arkow 1996).

However I argue that whilst the physical safety may be assured by the partnering of various human and nonhuman service providers, there may be little benefit for the mental health of nonhuman family members if they are housed away from the rest of their family. Flynn's (2000a) work has highlighted that the nonhuman defines their role in context of their external situation, interpreting interactions and behaviours of those around them. By placing the nonhuman family member in a shelter, unknown to them and without familiar

family members around, confusion and potentially traumatisation may occur. Symbolic interactionism, as an interactive process, suggests that nonhuman family members would experience isolation from their human companions, limiting their healing process from the violence, along with denying nurture or addressing any fears. To alleviate this would require maintenance of the family unit that have left the violent home. However refuge policy denies this possibility.

Whilst literature indicates that refuge workers are often aware of abuse toward nonhumans in their clients' families (Ascione 1998; Flynn 2000a), there exist no refuges within Australia who provide onsite services for them, stating openly that “pets cannot be accommodated in refuges” (www.dvcs.org.au, 2006). The provision of nonhuman facilities onsite at refuges would allow ongoing contact with their non-violent human counterparts, providing therapeutic contact between all.

## **Housing nonhuman counterparts within refuges**

To demonstrate the theoretical validity of housing nonhuman family members on-site, I suggest that interactions between individuals (nonhuman or human) are in context of their past experiences and current situation. Without the ability to communicate linguistically with nonhumans, ‘animal shelter’ staff are unable to inform the nonhumans’ as to current segregation from other family members. The role of the nonhuman within the family context is placed under confusion, not only for him/herself, but also in response to negated contact with the human counterparts previously supported whilst under duress within the violent home. That nonhumans act differently to the perpetrator of the violence and victims was demonstrated within Flynn’s (2000a) study. Therefore, to separate the nonhuman from the human family unit further impacts as a negative, confusing, and potentially frightening, experience. Care for nonhumans is based not only on shelter from weather and the provision of food, but also nurture, comfort and communication. By denying the nonhuman access to safety with their human family members, the latter three needs are also denied. To uphold the current policies of refuges to deny nonhumans access to refuge, is to deny basic rights to family members experiencing family violence.

## **Feminist ideals within refuge policies**

The exclusion of nonhumans from refuges begins at the level of policy formation, whereby the feminist ideals on which they are based actually reinforce exclusion of others, judgemental treatment of others, and the limiting of access to support by those in need. Refuge policy identifies that racism, ageism and sexism displayed by workers, committee or other residents is not tolerated, however the display of specieism is overt. By openly denying access to any nonhuman companions, refuge policies are guilty of three factors: limiting women and children’s choices in leaving family violence, increasing the stress of women and children who do leave their nonhuman companions in the home, and ensuring limited options are available for the nonhuman victim.

Supporters of current refuge policies may argue that ‘animals’ are not victims of family violence, however this paper has indicated the extent to which nonhumans are at the centre of family violence. Others may argue that ‘animals’ do not experience family violence in a traumatic way; yet again this paper has presented an argument, in line with Flynn’s (2000a) work on symbolic interactionism that disagrees. Other proponents may argue semantics to support their policies, suggesting that definitions of family violence do not cover ‘animals’. However nonhuman counterparts are likely to experience every form of *physical abuse* within a violent family, which includes causing pain and injury; denial of sleep, warmth or nutrition; denial of needed medical care; sexual assault; disablement; and murder. Further, literature identifies the higher likelihood that nonhumans are used as ‘tools’, thereby being at the centre of the family violence experience (Kogen et al 2004; Flynn 1999a, 1999b). These experiences all indicate oppressions and denial of rights, identified by feminism as an interconnected whole within family violence. Nonhumans left behind have little ability to escape and are captive victims to ongoing cruelty; imposed by reduced choices for their safety by reference to feminist ideals of ‘providing safe refuge for those at danger of family violence’. Further, feminist principles of accepting diversity and non-exclusionary practices towards minority groups are challenged.

## **Strategies for change**

As discussed, the joining of forces between ‘animal shelters’ and refuges to organise boarding for nonhumans represents valid attempts to remove the nonhuman family members from violent homes. However the likelihood that the nonhumans will be confused, further traumatised and negated from the early attempts at healing within the new family unit are increased due to their geographic placement away from the human family members. That symbolic interactionism indicates their role in the family, their relationships and experiences in context of the violence, so too does it suggest that the nonhuman family member is subject to inequity in treatment from services addressing ‘family’ violence. Feminism, in striving for non-judgemental acceptance for everyone escaping family violence, openly excludes nonhumans from safe residence in refuge. That feminists state they do not actively produce exclusionary practices is a falsity, especially when refuge policies not only exclude nonhumans, thereby increasing the likelihood they will continue to experience violence in the same home without the support of the non-violent humans, but also that they inflict further emotional turmoil on the women accepted into refuge by denying the accompaniment of other family members. If refuge policies allow for onsite service provision for nonhuman family members, women and children are faced with an easier decision making process when leaving family violence, as they do not need to consider staying for the safety of their nonhuman counterparts.

In a society that openly claims acceptance of diversity, and is searching for ‘models of best practice’, refuge policies should be re-visited to ensure appropriate provision of options for families. Incorporating elements of empowerment, choices and safety within practices is hypocritical rhetoric if policies deny this to some of the non-violent family members. Further, if refuge

workers advocate against oppression, violence and injustice in the home, the policies with which they work are also hypocritical. Social change for nonhuman family members can only occur if refuge workers are able to offer them safe refuge with their human counterparts, under the same roof. Without the family violence sector adopting these suggestions and altering policies accordingly, little will change for nonhuman family members. The ball now rests firmly with Boards of Management and Policy Committees to re-visit any forms of exclusion within refuge policies.

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