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Running head: HELPING ANIMALS, HELPING OURSELVES

Helping Animals, Helping Ourselves:
Reciprocal Benefits of Prosocial Behaviors Directed Toward Animals

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology
at Antioch University New England, 2019

Keene, New Hampshire



Department of Clinical Psychology
DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**HELPING ANIMALS, HELPING OURSELVES: RECIPROCAL BENEFITS
OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS DIRECTED TOWARD ANIMALS**

presented on September 23, 2019

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this research project to my mom, Nancy. Thank you for teaching me about unconditional love, authenticity, strength, resilience, humor, and kindness.

I carry you with me always.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this project was made possible by the beings in my life, past and present—two and four legged—who have rallied behind me with persistent love, support, understanding, and care. To the two dogs that I have dedicated my life to and who have dedicated their lives to me in turn, thank you for sitting beside me through all of those late nights studying, reading, and writing, reminding me how deeply loved I am, as I am. To my other animal family and friends, whether it be the ones I have worked with in my own experience in rescue or ‘my’ personal babies, you have given me such unending purpose and perspective in life—personally and professionally—bound by your authenticity, resilience, and desire for basic safety, understanding, connection, and joy. To my human family—your unending acts of generosity, including tolerating the copious animals I’ve brought home throughout the years and support as I’ve embarked on this adventure to become a clinical psychologist is so profoundly seen and appreciated. I wouldn’t have been able to complete this degree without you. To my love, my partner—I feel so lucky to have found someone to build a life with who gets me, cares for me, and supports me without condition. To my friends—one of the most remarkable things that this doctoral training has brought me is you.

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Abstract

This is a dissertation project on the reciprocal benefits—to volunteers and animals—of volunteering at animal shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries. I have provided a brief literature review on the relationship between prosociality and helper/recipient wellbeing, highlighting the current scarcity of research on the human enactment of prosocial behavior with animal recipients of help. I then further supported the need for continued research in this regard by examining the emerging body of research on the suggested wellbeing-benefits of human–animal interaction. An ecopsychological framework was utilized to emphasize the potential therapeutic affects (to both humans and animals) of engaging in prosocial behaviors directed toward animals. To explore the subjective experiences and meaning making of animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary volunteers a qualitative IPA, methodology was utilized. Semi-structured interviews were held with five participant–volunteers on a one-on-one basis, and discussions were largely focused on the wellbeing-benefits they have given and gained from their service work directed toward animals in need, as well as the challenges encountered by both humans and animals involved. Through thematic analysis, I endeavored to capture the essence of the phenomenon at hand, and multiple measures were taken to best ensure its overall rigor, credibility, and transferability. Findings of the research included a range of participant-perceived benefits gained through their service work including awareness of their own self-efficacy, feeling internally fulfilled, developing a heightened sense of resilience, and connecting to others. Participants additionally identified a range of beneficial impacts to their animal counterparts which are detailed in full. Implications of the research topic were explored on individual, systemic, and theoretical levels, and future directions for research and practice were identified.

Keywords: prosocial behavior, volunteer, human–animal, benefits

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Helping Animals, Helping Ourselves:

Reciprocal Benefits of Prosocial Behaviors Directed Towards Animals

In this dissertation project, I sought to better discover and understand the reciprocal benefits of working with animals in need for volunteers and animals at a variety of regional animal shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries. Volunteering, a form of prosocial behavior, has long been considered a beneficial act for both *helpers* and *recipients of help* (Brown W.M., Consedine, & Magai, 2005; Rietschlin, 1998; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). This claim, however, has not been adequately extended to include mixed-species populations (i.e., human helpers and non-human animal—referred to as “animals” throughout this study—recipients of help). As the current movement toward studying the relationships/bonds between humans and animals has uncovered preliminary evidence suggesting that both humans and animals may reap a variety of wellbeing-benefits as a result of their interspecies interactions (e.g., Chardonens, 2009; Fleishman et al., 2014; Hatch, 2007; Vrbanac et al., 2013; Wells, 2009), it seems probable that these benefits may persist—or even become heightened—within the context of helping relationships. By examining volunteers’ subjective meaning making experiences of their volunteer work, with a specific focus on the benefits they both give and receive from such work, there may be a variety of positive implications for (a) animal welfare initiatives (including volunteers and animals); and (b) psychological research/practice (including bodies of research on prosociality and the human–animal bond, and egalitarian models of animal-assisted interventions within clinical practice).

Prosocial Behaviors Benefit Both Helpers and Recipients of Help

Prosocial behavior is an essential form of human interaction that promotes social responsibility, social cohesion, and group belonging (Fiske, 2010). Due in part to the social

significance of these types of behaviors, prosociality is highly valued across cultures (Klein, Grossmann, Uskul, Kraus, & Epley, 2015). While there is some debate regarding the motives potentially underlying the human tendency toward prosociality, Batson (1994) proposed four distinct types of motivation that are frequently cited within the field: altruism, principlism, collectivism, and egoism. Inherent within three of these four types of motivation (principlism, collectivism, and egoism) is the belief that the individuals enacting prosocial behavior (i.e., helpers) are primarily motivated to help due to their implicit or explicit desire to be personally benefited. While this view of prosociality may be somewhat dissimilar to the selfless ideals that are outwardly touted in many societies, research suggests that helpful volunteers may in fact receive a range of physical, psychological, and social benefits as a result of their service directed toward others.

For example, Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found significant positive relationships between time spent volunteering and numerous facets of general wellbeing including physical health, satisfaction with life, self-esteem, level of happiness, and sense of autonomy/control. Prosocial behavior has also been linked to lower rates of depression, adverse stress reactions, and mortality (Brown, W. M. et al., 2005; Rietschlin, 1998; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). In addition, there has been compelling research to suggest that the more individuals identify with their role as helpers, the more likely they are to (a) be interested and willing to help others, (b) find a sense of purpose and/or higher meaning out of their helping experience, and (c) gain increased benefits to their overall wellbeing (Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014; Thoits, 2012).

Prosocial Behavior Toward Animals

While the current body of scientific literature on prosocial behavior is quite substantial, I have found limited explorations devoted to examining voluntary human enacted prosocial

behavior toward animals. This phenomenon, however, is highly relevant within the current social world, as highlighted by the countless organizations across the nation with a core mission of improving the welfare of animals (and coinciding with the growing literature on the human–animal bond). In this dissertation, I sought to explore this alternative dimension of human prosociality; I specifically considered the unique relationship between human helpers and animal recipients of help within the animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary setting, from the perspective of volunteers (i.e., the helpers). By examining how volunteers made meaning of their volunteer experiences, my goal was to begin to offer a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the potential benefits of prosocial behavior within these interspecies contexts.

In addition to contributing to the current broad body of research on the relationship between prosociality and mutual helper-recipient wellbeing, this study endeavored to add more specifically to the emerging body of research on the salutary effects of human–animal interaction. While researchers are beginning to gather evidence to substantiate the claim that human–animal interaction appears to be linked to various physical, psychological, and social benefits to both humans and animals, these findings are occasionally contested within psychological discourse on interspecies research due in part to the lack of depth or consistency within the field (Hosey & Melfi, 2014). Consequently, additional exploration of these findings may further validate this topic of study and advance the movement toward utilizing increasingly effective (in regard to mutual wellbeing-benefits) and ethical human–animal oriented activities both within and outside of the clinical enterprise (e.g., volunteerism within shelter/rescue/sanctuary environments, animal-assisted interventions within clinical practice, etc.). While a small step in this attempt to better understand these topics, I believe this study was a necessary step toward establishing a more robust base of knowledge needed to move forward

with thought and care in both research and practice.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the potential reciprocal benefits to volunteers and vulnerable animals housed at a variety of regional animal shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries, by exploring the subjective experiences and meaning making of volunteer-participants. The two primary research questions, and more detailed inquiries are as follows:

1. What meaning do shelter/rescue/sanctuary volunteers make of their volunteer experience?
 - 1a. What motivates volunteers to become involved in this type of service work?
 - 1b. What, if any, benefits do volunteers believe they gain from participating in this type of service work?
 - 1b1. Do volunteers experience and recognize any notable physiological, psychological, or social changes as a result of their volunteer work directed toward animals in need (e.g., in regard to heart rate, respiratory rate, self-esteem, self-concept, connection to others, relational competence, etc.)?
 - 1c. What challenges do volunteers experience in or as a result of their service work, and how do these challenges impact them (e.g., physiologically, psychologically, socially)?
2. How are shelter/rescue/sanctuary animals affected by humans' volunteer work?
 - 2a. How do volunteers imagine they are benefiting the animals within their organization (e.g., physically, psychologically, socially)?
 - 2b. What barriers do volunteers believe are restricting them from benefiting the animals within their organization and/or what challenges do animals experience (how

does this impact animals physically, psychologically, socially)?

2c. What measures (formal and/or informal) do volunteers use to assess changes in animal wellbeing?

The Study Population: The Evolution of Animal Shelters/Rescues/Sanctuaries

Dating back to the colonial period, “pounds” (Miller, 2007, p. 1) were utilized as temporary keeping-places for lost farm animals (referred to as ‘livestock’ at the time) where ‘owners’ were able to regain physical possession of ‘their’ animal(s) by paying a significant fee (as words including livestock, owners, their, our, her, his, and my can indicate ownership of animals—largely a reality in our current social world, as many species of animals are still legally considered property—single quotation marks have been used around these words throughout this text, as relevant, to signify that this language is being used to be consistent with our common English of the time, while bringing attention of these words to the reader, as this language can be problematic in certain contexts, as it is rooted in marginalizing social constructs). These pounds did not traditionally house companion animals, however, as many breeds of dogs and cats (especially mixed breeds) have not historically warranted substantial monetary values (Miller, 2007). Once there was pressure to open up these—or alternative—spaces for companion animals (likely due to uncontrolled populations in areas they shared with humans), however, killing-practices became widely instituted (often regardless of animal age, health, behavior, etc.) to reduce numbers of animals needing daily resources and care within these facilities (Miller, 2007).

In 1866 The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA, 2017a) was founded (shortly followed by various other animal support organizations) as the first organization targeted at improving the welfare of animals in the United States of America. While

not initially focused on improving conditions for animals in pounds—what we now know as animal *shelters*, *rescues*, and *sanctuaries*—the ASPCA eventually discovered the enormous need for animal protection services within these settings (ASPCA, 2017a; Miller, 2007).

The no-kill movement. Joining the ASPCA in the fight to improve conditions for animals within the shelter/rescue/sanctuary environment, the Best Friends Animal Society recognized a need for a drastic change within many facilities' routine practices—ending the killing, or *euthanizing*, of otherwise healthy animals (Best Friends, 2017). More than a hundred years after the founding of the ASPCA, in 1984, Best Friends began the *no-kill* movement, in which they pushed for shelters/rescues/sanctuaries to restructure their population control practices away from euthanasia and toward efforts at keeping animals alive, including but not limited to increased spaying/neutering programs, educational outreach events, and adoption efforts (Best Friends, 2017). This push was reflective of the popular view held by many within animal welfare initiatives, that getting animals adopted out or kept within facilities that serve as their lifetime safe haven are better, more humane options than euthanasia. According to Best Friends (2017), euthanasia rates have since dropped from 17 million animals a year (only including cats and dogs) in 1984 to roughly 2 million in 2016.

The need for volunteers. Today, shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries can take many forms and functions. These include, for example, private vs. municipal, no-kill vs. 'traditional,' and temporary housing vs. long term/forever housing. As these organizations (despite their 'type') notoriously have high financial outputs (e.g., food, rent, veterinary services) and frequently very minimal financial inputs (often depending largely on grants and donations to stay in operation), they typically rely on volunteer service to effectively attend to their various daily operations, including but not limited to animal care and outreach activities. While volunteers are not the only

hands entrenched within this (sometimes grueling) work, they are crucial to the successful operation of shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries today.

Definitions of Key Concepts

Prosocial behavior. Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, and Schroeder (2005) defined prosocial behavior as “a broad category of acts that are defined by some significant segment of society and/or one’s social group as generally beneficial to other[s]” (p. 366). In 1972 the concept of prosocial behavior was first identified and described by Wispé to contrast the emerging research at that time on antisocial behavior (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). As prosociality is an umbrella term, it includes a wide array of intentional modes of helping that may vary considerably in regard to motivation (e.g., altruism, principlism, collectivism, or egoism), manner of facilitation (e.g., organized or spontaneous), time of effect (e.g., short term or long term), and intended recipient (e.g., individual, community, human, or animal).

Although the term prosocial behavior represents a wide array of helping behaviors, the majority of research thus far has focused on prosociality in the form of volunteerism (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Consequently, Weinstein and Ryan (2010) warned, “conclusions drawn from the effects of volunteering on well-being may not necessarily generalize to other types of prosocial behaviors” (p. 222). Subsequently, for the purpose of this study, prosociality will be predominantly viewed in the form of volunteerism. Volunteerism is defined as the non-mandated and unpaid work of either an individual or a group with the mission of helping others of whom they have “no contractual, familial, or friendship obligation” (Van Willigen, 2000, p. S308).

Human–animal interaction. The topic of human–animal interaction, often alternatively referred to as the human–animal bond or the human–animal relationship, gained in momentum within the field of psychology in the 1970s (Hosey & Melfi, 2014). Human–animal interaction

may be roughly defined as the reciprocal interactions/bonds/relations between humans and animals, and the ways in which these interactions may affect either or both parties. Interspecies relationships have been examined by a multitude of disciplines, utilizing various terminologies and methodologies, with a diverse set of contexts and populations—both human and animal—over a relatively short period of time. Consequently, there is little consensus or shared psychological understanding within this field of study (Hosey & Melfi, 2014). This lack of consistency is reflected in the seemingly vast and miscellaneous subset of themes included within the study of human–animal interaction, including, for example, animal-assisted intervention, animal husbandry, and caretaker responsibility/role (Hosey & Melfi, 2014).

Conceptual Framework: Ecopsychology

A brief overview of ecopsychology. Ecopsychology is the study of the relationship, connection, and bond between humans and the natural world (Abram, 2002). The natural world, in this sense, refers to all components of nature including both sentient and non-sentient beings alike. In contrast to many psychotherapeutic approaches, ecopsychology embraces an interspecies frame in which humans are perceived as an inherent part of the larger ecosystem (Roszak, 1995). Within this model, human suffering is believed to be caused, at least in significant part, by one’s disconnection from nature, and subsequent disconnection from the self; ecopsychologists would position that the cultural trend toward individualism and industrialization is implicated in our collective misery (Shapiro, 1995). Ecopsychologists further assert that mental health may be improved when individuals can “mend their ties to the other species and cultures that share the web with them” (Shapiro, 1995, p. 225).

As the current model of ecopsychology emerged in response to the growing environmental crisis, its main tenets reflect a politically informed approach (Brown, 1995).

Within this framework humans, animals, and the environment are considered to be fundamentally interdependent, and consequently, all members of the earth (human and otherwise) need to be perceived and treated with honor and respect regardless of their social locations (i.e., gender, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, biology, taxonomy, communication style, sentience, etc.). Within this model, privilege is not placed on humans or human-human relationships, nor are other beings or relationships with other beings within the natural world (including animals) minimized or marginalized. All members of the earth are perceived and treated with value and significance. Moreover, it is the ecopsychologists' mission to restore health and wellbeing not only to individual humans, but also to animals, communities, the environment, and the natural world at large (Fisher, 2002).

The ecopsychological perspective. The main mechanism of change within ecopsychology is increased connection to the natural world. Consistent with this ideology, engaging in prosocial activities, which are rooted in a place of connection, has been demonstrated to increase both recipient and helper wellbeing. These reciprocal benefits are inline with ecopsychologists' belief in ecological interdependence, as well as their ultimate mission toward advancing the physical, psychological, and social position of both the self and others.

Due to the fundamental importance of the natural world within the field of ecopsychology, however, this researched phenomenon should be extended beyond human-human forms of prosociality into various human-nature forms. As animals play an essential role within the natural environment, are frequently receptive to human interaction, have the capacity to share limbic/empathic resonance with humans and vice versa, and are highly accessible to most people regardless of their physical location, the study of the human enactment of prosocial behavior directed toward animals may expand our understanding of this larger healing

connection from an ecopsychological perspective.

The therapeutic effects of human–animal interaction on wellbeing. The emerging body of scientific literature on human–animal interaction has begun to establish the claim that the relationship between humans and animals—particularly companion animals—is related to a variety of wellbeing-benefits to both the humans and animals involved. For example, in Polheber and Matchock’s (2014) recent experiment, they found significant decreases in individual’s heart rates and salivary cortisol levels when interacting with a therapy dog as compared to individuals who were either alone or accompanied by a close friend. In addition, studies have identified various psychological and social impacts of these interspecies interactions including but not limited to decreased stress and loneliness, and increased emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, self-confidence, and relational competence with both humans and animals (Chardonens, 2009; Fleishman et al., 2014; Vrbanac et al., 2013; Wells, 2009).

While studies have overwhelmingly focused on human wellbeing rather than animal wellbeing, companion animals are also believed to receive a variety of benefits through these interactions including increased access to resources such as shelter, safety, food, water, health care, and socialization (Chardonens, 2009; Hatch, 2007). For example, in Bergamasco et al.’s (2010) study they found that shelter dogs had an improved temperament and sociability/diffidence after positive human interaction. In addition, numerous studies have shown that dogs’ oxytocin levels significantly increase after being stroked by their human counterparts (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius, & Kotrschal, 2012). Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) even claimed, “Domestic dogs cannot survive outside the human domain” (p. 29).

This emerging body of research has made considerable strides toward establishing the relevance of human–animal interaction within the field of psychology, focusing particularly on

the potential implications for psychotherapeutic intervention. However, studies focusing on these interactions in relation to human enacted prosocial behavior are considerably limited at this time.

Current research and practice on the therapeutic impacts of engaging in prosocial behavior directed toward animals. To date, perhaps the largest body of research on the potential salutary effects of helping animals on the individuals engaging in said helping-work—although notably limited in breadth—has focused on dog-training and/or -adoption programs housed within correctional facilities. Cooke and Farrington (2016) conducted a meta-analysis on 10 relevant studies, finding emerging evidence to suggest salient benefits of dog-training programs on participant-inmates including improved self-control, decreased depressive symptoms, better staff-inmate relations, more hospitable prison environments, and lower recidivism rates after release.

Despite some limits to research, mutually therapeutic programs like these within correctional facilities have been sprouting up across the United States with considerable community support. Green Chimneys (n.d.-a), for example, is an esteemed non-profit organization located on a farm and wildlife center in New York, that offers both day and residential therapeutic programs for youth struggling with a range of psychological concerns. Green Chimneys (n.d.-b; n.d.-c) offers students opportunities to learn and serve within a variety of settings including within their Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, offering care to injured or otherwise vulnerable wildlife, and within their Dog Interaction Program, preparing shelter dogs for adoption through training and socialization. On Green Chimneys' (n.d.-c) website they explained, "Caretaking and training tasks require patience, good communication and a strong sense of responsibility," further noting, "These lessons help not only in training the dog [for example], but also in the student's interaction with [other people, including] peers, teachers and

family” (para. 3).

While research and practice in this regard has been gaining momentum in many respects, it is still an emerging field that has not been effectively extended—to my knowledge—in the form of volunteerism in animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary settings.

Summary

A small but growing body of research suggests that (a) prosocial behaviors have the potential to benefit both the individuals who help and the individuals who are being helped; and that (b) human–animal interactions have a range of positive effects on both the humans and animals involved. There is a current lack of research, however, on the specific reciprocal benefits derived from human volunteers engaging in prosocial behaviors directed toward animals in need within the shelter/rescue/sanctuary setting. By examining this under-researched phenomenon, this study aims to generate increased awareness and understanding of these potential salutary effects to be used as a preliminary step toward further empirical exploration.

Method

Research Methodology

This dissertation project employed a qualitative methodology in order to explore the subjective experiences and meaning making of animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary volunteers. With this approach, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What meaning do shelter/rescue/sanctuary volunteers make of their volunteer experience?
 - 1a. What motivates volunteers to become involved in this type of service work?
 - 1b. What, if any, benefits do volunteers believe they gain from participating in this type of service work?

- 1b1. Do volunteers experience and recognize any notable physiological, psychological, or social changes as a result of their volunteer work directed toward animals in need (e.g., in regard to heart rate, respiratory rate, self-esteem, self-concept, connection to others, relational competence, etc.)?
- 1c. What challenges do volunteers experience in or as a result of their service work, and how do these challenges impact them (e.g., physiologically, psychologically, socially)?
2. How are shelter/rescue/sanctuary animals affected by humans' volunteer work?
- 2a. How do volunteers imagine they are benefiting the animals within their organization (e.g., physically, psychologically, socially)?
- 2b. What barriers do volunteers believe are restricting them from benefiting the animals within their organization and/or what challenges do animals experience (how does this impact animals physically, psychologically, socially)?
- 2c. What measures (formal and/or informal) do volunteers use to assess changes in animal wellbeing?

Interviews were conducted with participant–volunteers on a one-on-one basis, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized to assess and analyze all qualitative data in hopes of capturing the essence of the phenomenon at hand (i.e., reciprocal benefits of prosocial behaviors directed toward animals).

Participants. Five non-mandated volunteers at a variety of regional animal shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries within the Northeastern region of the United States were recruited for participation. In an attempt to gather a sample that was best able to teach me about the phenomenon of interest, participants were required to volunteer at minimum eight hours per

month, and have served at their current site for at least six months. Included sites were non-kill, as cited in their mission statement, in an attempt to mirror the current no-kill movement within the animal welfare initiative. Included participants were 18 years old or older. Participation was not otherwise restricted.

In an attempt to engage with the animal rescue/rehabilitation community in a way that both honored the expertise of the given population and allowed me to gain access to qualified participants, I utilized processes of convenience/purposeful sampling. As I maintain strong connections to a number of animal-based organizations (sanctuaries, vet practices, non-profits, etc.) in the Northeast, I requested the help of known-contacts to direct me to and/or connect me with potential volunteer-participants (I did not personally know, however, any included participants prior to this research study). A recruitment flyer was sent electronically to these contacts for dispersal (Appendix B). Upon participants' response to this recruitment flyer via their completion of the electronic informed consent form and accompanying questionnaire, qualifying participants were contacted in order of completion to set up one-on-one interviews until five participant interviews were completed.

Data sources/interview protocol. Once participants were recruited and completed the informed consent process (Appendix C), they were asked to fill out a brief online questionnaire to gather basic demographic and volunteer data (Appendix E). Following the completion of this questionnaire, I contacted eligible participants (contact information was given during consent proceedings), and scheduled times to conduct individual semi-structured interviews over a secure phone or video call or at a location convenient for them (see preliminary questions listed at the end of this section). During each interview I took field notes attending to both dialogue and verbal/nonverbal observations (e.g., body language, speech). I also audio recorded each session

with participant consent (Appendix D). After each interview was completed, I transcribed the audio recording to be used in conjunction with my field notes for analysis purposes (described below).

While IPA allows for “the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in [...] light of the participants’ responses” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 57), the general interview questions, which were used as a framework for questioning, were as follows:

1. What motivated you to become a volunteer at an animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary?
2. Can you tell me about your volunteer work at [site name], and what your experience serving animals in need within this role/these roles has been like?
3. What are some of the ways that you think you have been impacted by doing this type of service work?
 - Prompt if participant does not attend to physiological, psychological, and social benefits.
4. What are some of the ways you think the animals you have worked with have been impacted by your volunteer work?
 - Prompt if participant does not attend to physical, psychological, and social benefits.
 - Prompt if participant does not address formal/informal measures or ways of ascertaining such changes.
5. What challenges, if any, have you faced in or as a result of your volunteer work? How have these challenges impacted you? How have these challenges impacted the animals you’ve worked with?

-Prompt if participant does not attend to physiological, psychological, and social impacts for themselves and for the involved animals.

6. Are you planning to continue your volunteer work with animals in shelters/rescues/sanctuaries? If yes, why?

Analysis. IPA was utilized to assess and analyze data with the goal of understanding participants' individual experience as fully and accurately as possible. I read through audio recording transcripts and their affiliated field notes numerous times in an attempt to "immerse" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 367) myself within the data. Once immersed, I took comprehensive notes about the process and content of each interview. I then highlighted potentially noteworthy quotes and focused more specifically on overall context (e.g., participant setting, type of participant role/animal interaction described), quote content, language/speech use, and perceived/described emotionality (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In addition, I endeavored to note my own thoughts, observations, and reflections as they arose (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Once I had thoroughly read and notated the transcripts/field notes, I identified any and all emerging themes within each individual interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). These themes integrated the significant details of the participant's responses with my own conceptualizations of their meaning. Pietkiewicz and Smith described this as the "dual interpretation process" (p. 362), in which the IPA researcher assumes an active role interpreting the interpretations (i.e., made meaning) of individual participants lived experiences. Once all emerging themes were formulated, I looked for potential connections between them across interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). During this process, comparable themes were clustered together and these superordinate themes and subthemes were provided descriptive labels (Pietkiewicz & Smith,

2012). A table (see Table 1) was then created to visually organize and display identified superordinate themes, their connected subthemes (when appropriate), and noted examples (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Several strategies were employed to enhance the rigor, credibility, and transferability of the analysis. Throughout the analysis process I routinely revisited the original transcripts in order to better ensure that the constructed superordinate themes and subthemes were representative of the original data collected. In addition, external auditors were utilized throughout the study to confirm that my interpretations were effectively supported by the data (i.e., confirmability). In this regard, I regularly met with external auditors to discuss our respective views on noteworthy quotes, emerging superordinate themes and subthemes until a consensus was met.

Credibility of the analysis was enhanced through the use of bracketing biases, negative case analyses, member checks, and an audit trail. *Bracketing biases* were used to identify the ways in which my personal experiences and worldview may have impacted interpretations of the data (see analysis description above and researcher reflection below). *Negative case analyses* were employed to detect potentially conflicting data/results, so that conclusions could be modified as needed to effectively represent a well-rounded picture of the perceived phenomenon. *Member checks* were offered to participants by routinely restating and/or summarizing what participants were saying to me during the course of their interviews to confirm that I was capturing an accurate depiction of their stated thoughts, feelings and experiences (Harper & Cole, 2012). Finally, an *audit trail* was kept to further protect against threats to validity, by keeping a full, well-documented record of all research proceedings (including interview transcripts, field notes, researcher reflections/bracketing biases, and all analyses).

To improve the study's transferability, I worked to supply thick descriptions of all of my analyses in hopes that the reader will be able to make thoughtful, informed decisions about the ways in which the study's findings can or cannot be transferred to other contexts.

Researcher reflection. As discussed, I endeavored to do all I could to protect the integrity of the data collection and analysis process. One such way was to engage in an ongoing process of reflection on—and well documentation of—my own biases that have the potential to affect the study data/results.

I have a rich history of volunteerism in animal-centered organizations, including an animal sanctuary, a veterinary practice, and multiple equine stables. Since I was a young child I have always been drawn to animals, especially those in need—individually and collaboratively rescuing and/or rehabilitating countless creatures in my life thus far, including but not limited to horses, dogs, cats, pigeons, rabbits, songbirds, turtles, pigs, turkeys, chickens, cows, sheep, goats, ducks, and geese. I have been profoundly impacted (both positively and negatively, although the good have definitely outweighed the bad for me) by this work with and for animals—feeling more whole, empowered, resilient, and connected, before, during, and following attempts to help. These (and other) benefits have persisted for me whether I have been helping animals alone or with others, but they have historically been most apparent to me when I have helped alongside like-minded people within a volunteer position (particularly at an animal sanctuary).

Although it is clear that I have a very positive personal perspective on the reciprocal benefits of prosocial behaviors directed toward animals—as it has shaped my sense of identity, passion, purpose, and aspiration, and is the source of my interest in this project—I recognize that this is only my story, and may not reflect others' experiences. Consequently, in order to (a) be

aware of my biases as they arose; (b) determine the ways that these biases may have impacted my various roles as a researcher; and (c) better allow the volunteer-participants to share their own stories, including their potentially less than stellar experiences, so that I could better capture the true essence of this phenomenon, I endeavored to engage in a continual process of self reflection throughout the duration of the study.

Procedure. The first step in this study was recruiting participants through a process of purposeful sampling. I contacted known participants in animal welfare initiatives (all residing within the Northeastern region of the United States) and requested their support in electronically distributing the recruitment flyer to current volunteers. My friendly contacts were not asked to participate in the study, they were asked only for help with recruitment of participants who were 18 years old or older and had been volunteering within a non-kill animal rescue, shelter, or sanctuary for at least the last six months for eight hours a month. The recruitment flyer included a very brief description of the study, an incentive for participation (\$20 Amazon gift card), and a link to the informed consent form (Appendix B for a sample of the recruitment flyer).

If prospective participants chose to click on the link to the informed consent form they were redirected to a new page, which included (but was not limited to) a more thorough description of the study, including potential risks and benefits they might experience, an explanation of participant confidentiality, and their rights as research participants (Appendix C). If readers still wished to participate in the study, they entered their name and contact information and clicked a button at the bottom of the page to confirm that they read, understood, and were consenting to participate.

After entering their contact information and consenting to participation by clicking on the included button, participants were redirected to a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix E)

which was created on Survey Monkey. After receiving their completed demographic questionnaires, I contacted eligible participants in the order in which I received them, utilizing the contact information they entered on the informed consent form. Upon successfully getting in contact with interested parties I then sent them a link (again, through Survey Monkey) to a consent for audio and/or video recording form (Appendix D) and scheduled their one-on-one interviews over the phone (N=2), via secure video call (N=2) or at a location that was convenient for them (N=1). Following receipt of completed consent for audio and/or video recording forms and subsequently conducting all five interviews, audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed using the IPA strategy detailed above.

Ethical considerations. Two primary ethical considerations emerged during the initial construction of the following study: confidentiality and informed consent.

Confidentiality. The following efforts were made to ensure participant confidentiality: Once in receipt of completed consent forms, I assigned each participant an ID number (e.g., Participant One, Participant Two, etc.), which was used on all research data/documents. Participants' consent forms (with their identifying data and contact information) were locked in a file cabinet, which remains within my personal possession, and is kept separate from their assigned ID numbers (which is locked in a separate file cabinet, also within my personal possession). All physical (e.g., handwritten field notes) and electronic (e.g., audio files, interview transcripts, data analysis) documents were secured, either within a locked file cabinet (physical) or with a password protection (electronic). After the study is completed and uploaded to my university's dissertation database, all audio files will be permanently deleted. While participants' direct quotes were utilized in the analysis and write up, all included quotes have been

deidentified so that they do not include any information that may jeopardize participant confidentiality.

Informed consent. Participants were made explicitly aware of potential risks/benefits they could have experienced as a result of their engagement in this study, so that they could effectively make an informed decision about whether or not they would like to participate in this research project. These risks and benefits (which are described below) were detailed in the informed consent form (Appendix C), which participants read and signed (electronically) prior to their engagement in the study.

While the probable risk assumed by participating in this study was very low, there was a potential risk for emotional distress. If participants had a negative experience volunteering or interacting with animals in need, it is possible that having asked them to think about and answer questions related to their volunteer experience may have caused them distress. Consequently, it was imperative that I—as the researcher—endeavored to utilize my clinical acuity, so that I could assess participant’s emotional wellbeing throughout the duration of the interview proceedings. In the event that a participant appeared to be experiencing heightened distress, I would have opened up a dialogue about this observation, and stopped the study if needed (as noted in the informed consent form). Participants were also informed that they could choose to take a break or withdraw from the study at any time, without risk of penalty (i.e., they would still receive their \$20 gift card and their decision to participate or not would have no bearing on their volunteer work). As stated in the informed consent form, I could have also provided information to participants about obtaining counseling services upon their request.

While it could not be guaranteed that participants would experience personal benefits as a result of their participation in this study, it was reasonable to believe that some benefits may

have occurred. For example, participants may have benefited from reflecting on and talking about their experiences volunteering and serving animals in need. By asking them to share their personal experiences they may have felt increasingly valued, recognized, and heard. In addition, they could have thought about their involvement in this study as another way of giving (to other volunteers, animals, animal-welfare organizations, and various research fields)—which they may have felt good about. Finally, as noted above, participants were offered a \$20 Amazon gift card as an incentive for participation. While this amount was intended to increase willingness to participate in this study, it was a small enough token of gratitude that it would not create unwanted pressure.

Limitations. There are a number of potential limitations inherent within this study's design. As the sample of participants was (a) very small, and fairly limited in regard to diversity; and (b) chosen from a small number of regional shelters/rescues/sanctuaries, which was also fairly limited in regard to diversity (e.g., animal populations, volunteer roles, level of engagement), the study's generalizability and transferability may be limited. Consequently, I endeavored to provide the reader with thick descriptions that may better allow them to ascertain if the presented material is relevant for their intended purposes.

Method Summary

To explore the subjective experiences and meaning making of animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary volunteers I utilized IPA, a qualitative methodology. I conducted semi-structured interviews with participant–volunteers on a one-on-one basis, and focused the inquiry on the wellbeing-benefits they have given and gained from their service work directed toward animals in need, as well as any challenges they or the animals they serve may have faced. Through thematic analysis, I intended to capture the essence of the phenomenon at hand, and

employed multiple measures to best ensure its overall rigor, credibility, and transferability.

Results

Demographic Information

Utilizing the questionnaire listed in Appendix E, demographic information was collected from each participant interviewed for this research study. Age of the five participants ranged from 18 to 50 years old. The sample primarily identified as ciswomen (four), with one participant identifying as a cisman. The racial and ethnic identity makeup of the sample was limited, with four participants identifying as White or European, and one participant identifying as Hispanic or Latinx. Highest education completed varied from some middle or high school (one participant) to recipients of high school diplomas (two participants) to recipients of bachelor's degrees (two participants). Four of the five participants were engaging in full-time employment outside of their volunteer role (with one of these participants also identifying as a student); one participant identified as unemployed (though identifying as a student). Self-identified socioeconomic status ranged from low (one participant) to middle (four participants). All participants were residing and volunteering within the Northeastern region of the United States of America.

While participants' volunteer locations were redacted for this write up to preserve confidentiality—participants volunteered at three separate non-kill animal rescues, shelters, or sanctuaries—two participants each from two different organizations, and one participant from a third organization—generally specializing in the rescue, rehabilitation, care, and adoption of domestic, companion animals (mostly, though not entirely, cats and dogs). Duration of time volunteering at participants' current organizations varied from one and a half years to seven years; three participants noted that this was their first experience volunteering within animal

rescues, shelters, or sanctuaries, and two volunteers reported prior experiences working in other volunteer facilities (one working at one prior organization and one working at four prior organizations). Time spent volunteering each month—in days and hours—varied from roughly four to six days/15 hours a month to everyday (28-31 days)/160-plus hours a month.

Volunteer roles were diverse across participants, with responsibilities including fostering of cats and dogs, providing daily care to shelter animals, engaging in training and/or socialization activities, assisting and/or coordinating adoptions, leading/co-leading organization events, storing supplies, transporting animals to receive medical care, and otherwise advocating on behalf of the organizations' animals/mission.

Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

Upon talking with participants about their experiences volunteering within animal rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings, 10 superordinate themes emerged: (a) factors leading to volunteers' involvement in service work directed toward animals, (b) awareness of one's own self-efficacy, (c) internal sense of fulfillment, (d) development of a heightened sense of resilience, (e) connection to the volunteer community, (f) connection to animals, (g) challenges experienced by volunteers during service work, (h) beneficial impacts to animals, (i) challenges to animals, and (j) measures utilized to assess impacts to animals. Superordinate themes b, c, d, e, and f are further clustered together as overarching participant-perceived benefits gained through their service work. Superordinate themes h, i and j are further clustered together as volunteers' perception of their impact on rescue, shelter, or sanctuary animals. Superordinate themes a through j—as appropriate—were broken down into smaller subthemes which are presented and detailed in the sections below. Excerpts from interviews are utilized throughout to provide rich descriptions and support the analysis given.

Factors Leading to Volunteers' Involvement in Service Work Directed Toward Animals

Participants discussed the motivating factors leading to their initial decisions to volunteer at their given animal rescues, shelters, or sanctuaries and four subthemes emerged: (a) preexisting love of animals, (b) connection to a specific animal or animals within the volunteer organization, (c) connection to a volunteer organization's mission, and (d) desire for connection to others.

Preexisting love of animals. All five participants spoke to their preexisting love of animals as a major contributing factor to their decision to seek out volunteer positions in animal welfare organization(s). Participant Two explained:

I was like, it seems like a fun thing to do. I like dogs and I like cats and I like... I like dogs. And it was literally like, I like dogs! And I was so excited to be working with animals because I was like, that's what I want to do, I don't know what I want to do, but I want to work with animals somehow.

This crucial component—having a genuine affection for animals—to participants' decision to pursue service work with animal populations appeared for some to extend beyond a fondness to a tangible part of their identity. Participant Three remarked:

I've always wanted and loved animals since I was little. I was always rescuing the injured bunny rabbit in the back yard, or the bird that flew into the window, or the snake that to me had no home. So, I was always bringing stuff in going *hey look what I found*. Stray cat in the parking lot, and I'd be like *look what followed me home*. And I've been doing that since I was 5. [...] It was just who I was.

Connection to a specific animal or animals within the volunteer organization. In addition to an overall love of animals, three participants also spoke to a particular connection to a

specific animal or animals within the organization that in some way lead to their ultimate decision to volunteer. For example, Participant Five spoke about her experience adopting one of ‘her’ cats and considering for the first time if she might be able/willing to foster other cats through the organization moving forward. She stated:

That summer we adopted one of our cats from [rescue] and I got to know the foster, and I had never thought about cat fostering, it had always been dog fostering that I had thought about [...]. I had never thought about the cats that needed help, it just never clicked in me that oh yeah, cats are sitting in the shelter and things are happening to them too... because everyone really talks about the dogs more. And when I had adopted [cat] I was like *oh, that’s something I can do!*

Participant Five went on to note, “[Adopted cat] was a key part in all of that.” This experience was echoed in other participants, with Participant Three explaining:

I met them at [a store], they were doing an adoption day event. And I happened to walk in and I saw two little kittens in one of their cat towers, and it reminded me of the cat that I had. And the next day I brought my husband with me to take a look, like maybe we could adopt one. And we got to talking to the ladies that were there and I said, *I’d be open to fostering, I used to foster cats all the time with the other rescue, and would love to get back into it.* And within a month I had [two cats], my first two fosters. [...] Boy and girl, brother and sister, brats both of them (laughing). But they were adorable, absolutely adorable. And that was my first step.

Connection to a volunteer organization’s mission. Feeling empowered or struck by a volunteer organization’s mission and prepared in some way to fulfill the demands required to work toward the fulfillment of said mission was another key element identified by many

participants (N=4) to their decision to initially pursue volunteer work. One of the participants detailed this experience, stating:

I really liked what their organization was about. I liked that... you know a lot of people probably want to pull from their own neighborhood, from [location], but I know our rate here—while our municipal shelters are still kill-shelters they're a really low rate—whereas down South [where participant's chosen volunteer organization pulls animals from] it is horrible, including the influx that they get down there. So I liked that I felt like I was making more of a difference volunteering with a rescue that was doing that, plus they have a sanctuary in [location], and they actually have feral dogs and feral cats that live on the sanctuary, so if they can't be adopted—because we stand behind all of our animals—if they can't be adopted because there are behavioral issues or whatever they try everything that they can and then they'll put them in the sanctuary. So, no matter what, these animals are cared for.

This participant went on to explain that upon the purchase of her home she became equipped to contribute to the rescue by way of fostering animals, explaining:

My husband and I bought our house [X number of] years ago, we closed [on this date]. One of the reasons we bought the house was because it had 1/3rd of an acre that we could clear out, and it had multiple levels which helped with the separation of the cats and the dogs if they needed space.

This experience was similarly detailed by Participant Three, who added:

I wanted to volunteer but I'm not really big into going somewhere... to a building to volunteer. But I can volunteer my house, I can volunteer taking in a cat and holding it

until a better home is found so it doesn't get killed at the pound. So, I offered to start getting involved.

This sense of empowerment and agency to contribute toward positive change appeared for many to prompt their initial involvement in service work directed toward animals in need.

Desire for connection to others. Finally, two participants also spoke to a desire to engage in volunteer-work in an attempt to connect to others. One participant detailed her initial contemplation about volunteering within a local rescue with her two children upon getting divorced—naming a desire to occupy her time doing something constructive while forming new bonds with others in the process. She explained:

I was a single mom looking for something to do with my kids on the weekends that didn't cost anything. And would help me... I was newly divorced, didn't have a lot of friends. So, I kind of got into it hoping to make some friends, which I certainly have (laughing). And it definitely gave us, you know, things to do on the weekends.

These four initial motivating factors identified by this study's sample contributed to participants' decisions to pursue animal-oriented volunteer work and lead to a wealth of self-identified beneficial impacts to their own wellbeing.

Benefits Gained through Service Work

Interviews with participants about the benefits of their volunteer work yielded five major superordinate themes including: (a) an awareness of one's own self-efficacy, (b) an internal sense of fulfillment, (c) development of a heightened sense of resilience, (d) connection to the volunteer community, and (e) connection to animals. Some of these superordinate themes (a, b, d and e) contained smaller subthemes, which are detailed below.

Awareness of one's own self-efficacy. All five participants spoke to the idea of feeling increasingly effectual upon their engagement in animal rescue, shelter, or sanctuary volunteer-work. This superordinate theme was broken down into three subthemes: (a) witnessing one's positive impact on others; (b) feelings of accomplishment derived from one's service work; and (c) development of heightened knowledge, skill, experience, and confidence in one's own ability.

Witnessing one's positive impact on others. Each participant (N=5) described experiences in which they felt as if they made a positive impact on someone else's life through their service work. Participants spoke to beneficially impacting animals, individuals, families, communities, other rescues, and society at large. Numerous participants detailed positive impacts they had made to particular beings they had encountered in their organization, including Participant One who described the progression of a cat he worked with and ultimately adopted,

She was this tiny little runt and we noticed that she was a little shy and skittish when we first got her. After a while she started warming up and everything. And then she just, you could see, when we come home [now] you can see the glow in her.

This sentiment was echoed by many other participants, with some acknowledging their awareness that their involvement within their volunteer role could be the difference between life and death for some animals. For example, Participant Five noted, "I'm saving their lives. If I don't agree to foster them, they're going to get put down."

Another participant described this impact on a larger, more systemic scale, explaining: You know, doing what I do... our organization has saved I'd say about a thousand animals a year. [...] So, we've been around for 10 years now, so we have definitely saved well over 10,000 animals. I have been part of that. I'm not as much into the part of

pulling them from the shelter, and the organizational part of everything in coordinating all of that, but I know I've had an impact.

Taking this even a step further, participant three began to detail the multitude of indirect changes her volunteer work facilitates beyond the direct impact to the shelter/rescue/sanctuary animal(s) and the adopting person(s), explaining:

Knowing that I made a change, I changed something. It's not a big change it's a little change... but that changed that animal's life. There's a saying out there and I'm going to misquote it I know it—[...] *you can't change the life of everyone, but you can change the life of one*—and that's what it is, it's one change at a time. And that change of that one animal, and maybe the family it goes to, makes a change in that family, and maybe those kids grow up being more compassionate, maybe that family ends up being more compassionate. It can lead to so much, like the butterfly effect.

She went on to explain:

If I'm doing something kind and a child sees that, maybe the next time the child wants to step on the worm or the slug that's outside, maybe instead of stepping on them they either leave them alone or just move them out of the way. [...] Hopefully, if they see it in me, they find it within themselves and they can pass that along, and apply that to their life.

Feelings of accomplishment. Four participants reported feeling a sense of accomplishment in their volunteer work. For example, Participant Four stated:

To me [volunteering has] been one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had in my life, of anything I've done in my life. Seeing these dogs go from shut down in a shelter, coming up here on the van, coming into our homes, and just every week watching them

blossom. It's given me a great sense of accomplishment to know that I've helped hundreds of animals—who would be dead—find their happily ever after.

Participant One also described feelings of accomplishment upon witnessing the metaphorical fruits of his hard labor, stating:

You work so hard rescuing a cat, bringing them in, getting them social, [...] you're feeding them, you're taking care of them, and then someone comes along and they say *I want that particular cat*. And then once you bring them [to their new] home it feels like you accomplished something. You made somebody else happy plus you're giving an animal a home.

Development of heightened knowledge, skill, experience, and confidence in one's own ability. In addition to feeling accomplished in their service work, participants reported feeling increasingly confident in their abilities upon developing heightened knowledge, skill and experience in working within their particular volunteer roles (N=5). Participants identified becoming increasingly competent in training and socializing animals, becoming attuned to their behavior, and advocating effectively on their behalf. One participant additionally noted that—as she volunteers alongside both of her children—she has witnessed considerable growth in her kids, which she has also attributed to their involvement with rescue. She stated:

[Being in the rescue] has taught my kids a lot [...]. They've learned compassion, they've learned how to respect animals. You know, to read their body language, and how to treat them. [...] They've learned leadership skills. My daughter eventually, she was I think [a preteen] when we started and by the time she was [a teenager] she was running events with me. [...] So she can... we can throw her in to run an event if we need to. She doesn't have the time now as [an early twenty year old], most of the time, but you know [...] she

was my second in command during events [for a while], and it's actually her experience in rescue that has led her to start her own [animal oriented] business the last [several] years, so, that experience all those years has really helped her.

This movement toward attaining leadership skills—and at times leadership positions—was also noted by other participants. One participant described a progression starting off at the rescue cleaning cages and now serving as one of the Adoption Coordinators while being on the rescue's board. Participant Four added that upon stepping up into a leadership role within her rescue facility, she learned leadership strategies that actually helped her secure a job, explaining:

It's definitely [...] brought me out of my shell a lot. I was a little shy when I first started. Most people would never say they would see me as shy, but I kind of was. It helped develop me into being a leader. Being a leader in this organization has actually helped me get jobs, because there were people in [the job I was applying for] who knew the organization—they had adopted from [us]—and they said *oh my God their leaders are great [...] she's got experience with them, she'll make a great supervisor, so take her in*. And, you know, so [volunteer work has] definitely, it's helped me grow in a lot of aspects.

Internal sense of fulfillment. All five participants also identified feeling in various ways internally fulfilled by engaging in service work directed toward animals in need. This superordinate theme was broken down into three subthemes: (a) a sense of purpose and direction derived from one's volunteer work, (b) feeling rewarded from one's volunteer work, and (c) holding an identity as a volunteer.

Sense of purpose and direction derived from one's volunteer work directed toward animals. In addition to feeling connected to their volunteer organizations' mission as was previously discussed, all five participants further described feeling as if their volunteer work gave them a sense of purpose and direction. Participants spoke to feeling an internal drive toward getting animals off of the streets, into safety, and into loving homes when appropriate. Participant One stated, "the fact that we're helping them... and getting them a home, it's basically what, you know, my goal is personally." Participant Five added, "with volunteer work whether it's with animals or with anything, people that volunteer generally do it because they have an inherent passion or desire to do something [good]" (i.e., affect positive change in the face of hardship). This sense of purpose appeared for some to give them a sense of agency in climates where they otherwise felt ineffectual. Participant Three talked about this point, explaining, "[When you're engaging in animal rescue] you know you affected change. You can't affect change in politics, you can't affect change in religion, you can [however] affect change in the lives that are around you."

One participant in particular explained that her service work had actually contributed to her decision to pursue a degree to become a veterinary technician—something that she is currently working toward in tandem with her volunteering roles. She explained that her volunteer work opened her up to developing interest in working with all types of animals, explaining:

We're working on a farm [...] for two days and I'm already like... when I was little I was like *I don't want to work with cows, I don't want to work with horses, I don't want to work with chickens*, and now I'm like *Let's work with everything!* The more that I learn about it the more I'm like *Yeah! Let's do it.*

Feeling rewarded from one's volunteer work. Acting upon this genuine passion and desire to work with and for animals contributed to many participants reporting that their volunteer work felt deeply rewarding (N=4). For example, Participant Three stated, "My job—my actual job—pays my mortgage, but rescue pays my soul. And so, I find it to be very fulfilling." This sentiment was reiterated across interviews in various forms; with Participant One stating "It's very rewarding doing what we do, very rewarding;" Participant Four stating "it has fulfilled everything I had hoped to get out of it;" and Participant Five stating, "it makes me feel good knowing that I am contributing."

Holding an identity as a volunteer. Finally, some participants spoke to identifying with their position as a volunteer as more than an activity but a part of who they are (N=4). For example, one participant connected her service work to a part of her spirituality, explaining:

I'm also very involved in my church. So [...] I'm helping God's creatures. I'm [Christian] and our church is based on love. Love of people, love of animals, love of the Earth. And you know, it's just been another branch out for me in my spirituality to help these animals, and [I] know that I'm helping God's creatures. I'm doing something here. I'm educating people on how to treat their animals, what goes on in the world. You know? With these animals and how we need to help them... they're not garbage, they're God's creatures, and we need to take care of them.

Participant Three connected her service work more generally to her identity, noting:

It's not something that is a passing for me, it is something that is a lifelong thing for me. I will always be involved in rescue one way or the other. I couldn't be a veterinarian so I'm a rescuer instead. [...] Figure if I've been doing it since I was five I've got a feeling I'm going to be doing it until I'm 95. [...] Part of who I am.

Several participants upheld their volunteer-identity as in some ways dissimilar to those not invested in animal-welfare initiatives. Participant One, for example, stated:

A very big passion. You know, people who volunteer, it's like uh... it's like, not a job, it's like something that they desire to do. You know, it's not for everybody. You know, not everybody can just do what we do, some people just can't handle it. It's too much on their plate or they just don't care. You know. But there's people like us out there that's like such big animal lovers that they try to do everything they possibly can to help out the animals out there.

Another participant added:

Once rescue is in your blood it's not the easiest thing to get out of. There are people who come in and they're gang-busters, and they're so big in the rescue and then all of a sudden they fall away and they do nothing anymore. And it's like okay then either you don't have it in you or it just wasn't giving you what you felt you needed. It's just something now that my kids and I just can't see ourselves not doing it. [...] it's just something that will always be part of us now.

Participant Five additionally noted how her identification with volunteering has been felt by those around her, explaining, “now people know if they [hear] of someone whose looking [for an animal,] they're normally like *Oh go talk to [participant's name], she might be able to help you with the rescue stuff*, because now people they're used to this is kind of what I do.” This experience of identifying with and being identified by volunteering within animal rescue, shelters, or sanctuaries resounded across numerous participants as a point of passion and pride.

Developing a heightened sense of resilience. Several participants additionally spoke to developing heightened resilience upon engaging in volunteer work (N=4). As this type of service

work is often marked by significant moments of adversity (which is discussed more below), participants explained how they navigate hardships—small and large—to attend to their own wellbeing as well as the animals that they’re working to serve. Participant Four explained that she has learned to regulate her own experience of negative emotionality (words including positive and negative have been used in this text to describe individual perceptions of stated feelings—they are not intended to make generalized statements on feelings overall, as feelings are not in and of themselves inherently positive or negative) upon regularly working with highly stressed animals, stating:

I mean stressed dogs can make you stressed too, but it teaches you, you don’t want the stress to feed off each other, so you have to learn how to even in stressful situations, even when the dogs are [misbehaving] or you’re struggling with that animal, to just kind of relax yourself and center yourself because you’re not helping them at all if you’re reflecting their behavior.

Another participant further explained that during particularly challenging situations (e.g., she described a situation working with abandoned kittens where many of them did not, unfortunately, survive despite her best efforts) she has become able to feel a full range of—at times very difficult—emotions while managing to still engage in her volunteer work to serve the other animals she knows are in need. She explained upon experiencing multiple losses of foster-kittens:

So you have to go through that, and that’s heartbreaking, and it’s heartache, and then you have to (deep breath) deal with it, swallow it, put it behind you, and go on to the next pregnant cat or the next set of kittens that come your way and not carry the baggage with you. It’s always there but you don’t carry it.

Participant Two further described feeling as if her volunteer work has prompted her to begin shifting her own negative views about herself, explaining that by working so closely with animals she has become increasingly accepting of herself and content within her life. She stated:

Sometimes I'll think, I'm not special or anything, I'm not good enough for some activities or to go do some things. You know, I'm not the best singer. I'm not the best artist, I'm not the best this or whatever. But, when you see those animals that are like *I don't care what's going on in my own life so long as I got toys and I got food and I got water and I got a bed, that's all I care about.* And you're like you know what, I don't need to be the best at everything, because I can like do what the dogs do.

Despite several participants describing ways in which their service work led to heightened resiliency, one participant appeared to diverge slightly from the other included volunteers. While she did note a wealth of beneficial impacts she had received from her participation in rescue work—including noting that overall she believes her volunteer role has reduced her level of stress in life—she also noted several challenges that have come up for her, including as it relates to her emotional wellbeing. In this regard, she explained that her service work has at times felt “exhausting” and “emotionally draining.” She additionally added that since volunteering she notices that, “When I talk about animals now I will cry a lot faster than I used to.” While this may or not relate seamlessly with this theme of resilience, her reports of managing stress/distress were prominent enough to acknowledge how they may offer a different perspective than the rest of participant–volunteers.

Connection to the volunteer community. Another major theme addressed by volunteers was connection—both to the other people within the volunteer community and to the animals they're working with and for.

The majority of participants spoke to their experiences connecting to others—both within their specific volunteer organizations and within the larger network of like-minded individuals/organizations—as a significant benefit of their engagement in service work. This superordinate theme was broken down into four smaller subthemes: (a) collaboration and support within volunteer role; (b) care received from community outside of volunteer role; (c) perception of love and connection within community; and (d) connection to own family via engagement in rescue work.

Collaboration and support. All five participants detailed numerous ways in which their rescue communities collaborated with and supported one another to meet the daily demands of working within their given organizations, generating a sense of comradery and community. Participant Four explained, “We always say it takes a village, because we do all need to work together and coordinate.” Participants explained how this collaboration and support can take many forms, from the range of expertise offered by each individual in and connected to their organizations, to lending a hand to one another when schedules get tight.

Participant One detailed the multifaceted workings of his particular rescue, noting the various roles volunteers hold and how all of them make a tremendous impact toward their collective goals:

Some are active [...] out front—whether it be cleaning the cages or doing the events—and then there are other people behind the scenes—we have a grant writer, we have a lawyer. You know. Then we have people that [...] foster, that’s all they do is just foster [...]. We have a group [...] with everybody’s names and what they do and everything, and a lot of times I don’t even know who half of these people are because they can be, that’s all they do is donate food, every week, every month, or whatever [...].

So, [...] everybody's got a job, everybody's got something to do and it makes an impact on us.

He went on to explain how local businesses including a veterinary office and a pet store contribute to the successful functioning of their rescue's day to day:

We work with our vet thank God. Our vet's really cool with us. You know, they bill us. We get up to a certain amount [of money owed], and then we bring it down. And then we build up to a certain amount, and then we bring it down. Big shout out to [veterinarian], he's a big help (laughing). Very big help to us. Even vets do it! There [are] vets out there who help volunteers half the time. They'll say *waive this visit or I'll waive this medication*, or you know whatever the case may be for us... he helps us out a thousand and one percent. Even [a local store], we have cats there that we're allowed to keep in cages, and people see them... they go in there and they're like *look at this cat I want [him or her]*, and then they fill out the application. So, they're a big help also.

Participant Four also described the evident teamwork present within her rescue's community, explaining:

[When animals come into the rescue they] have to go for a health check [...], but we have people who work, you know, who can't make it. So, we'll be like, *Okay, [dog name] needs to go to their health check on Wednesday but [volunteer name] needs to work*. And someone will always step up and say, *Okay, no problem I'll come pick them up. I'll come get the dog and take them to the health check, or [...] drop [them] off at my house on [your] way to work and pick [them] up at the end of the day*. You know, everyone's willing to step in and help each other. Having problems with your foster... there's always somebody who can [...] come up with some kind of solution to your problem or help

you. It's very supportive. We've supported each other through ups and downs in our personal lives as well as in the rescue. It's definitely, it is a community. Rescues who don't form those bonds don't last.

Several participants also spoke to perceiving this reciprocal sense of collaboration and support outside of their particular organization, but extending to a larger network of like-minded individuals/organizations. Participant One explained:

I mean we don't even have to know each other. You know I was down in [location] and there was this one girl down there, and she wanted to start her own rescue [...]. I was giving her ideas, we were going back and forth and everything. I got her number she got mine. And then we communicated you know. I can keep in touch with her if we need something, [she can keep in touch with me if] she needs something. So, we're all across the United States, we may not know each other but we all know that we do rescue.

Participant Two similarly shared:

Just this morning someone on a [rescue] Facebook group that I'm in was like, *Oh man I need some cat food, I don't know how much I need but I just need some because I need to feed the cats that I take care of.* And everybody was like *Location, right now. What kind of cat food do you want? How many cans do you need? What brand do they eat?* And they were like, [...] *How much do you want, you can have all of my cat food, I can get more.* And [the person who made the initial post was] like *Oh my God, okay!*

Care received from community outside of volunteer role. Participants shared stories of their relationships with fellow rescue community members, including tales of supporting one another through challenging life situations outside of their rescue work (N=2). One participant

described her community's reaction to learning of a tragedy one of their members and her family endured:

One of the staff members lost two of her dogs, and lost everything that she owned in a fire. And everybody was just like, *What size shoe are you? What size shoe is your son? What size shoe is your husband? What size jackets are you, what size pants are you, I'm going to bring you everything.* She gets things thrown at her all day, and she's like, *How am I supposed to carry these home?* And people are like, *Just take them, you can have whatever you want.*

She went on to describe her own experience receiving aid from her volunteer community and the positive thoughts and feelings it generates within her, stating:

I don't know how else to say it but it just feels great because then you know, if you ever need anything then there's a hundred people that have your back [...]. Even if you just casually mention it like, *I need a new leash for my dog [...]* and everyone's like, *Here. Oh my dog needs to go to the vet* and they're like, *Here take my money.* Or like, *Ah, my dog has a scratch on his paw* and they're like, *Let me look at it, let me look at it, is he okay, is he okay?* Or like, *Ah man, I'm not feeling good today* [and they respond saying,] *Do you need soup, I'll bring you soup.*

Love and connection. Perhaps connected in part to this giving and receiving of care beyond the confines of one's volunteer role, several participants spoke to feelings of love and connection to their fellow volunteers (N=3). From an affectionate bond with a particular individual to a group of individuals, some participants named feeling drawn to their volunteer community with genuine adoration. Participant One simply captured this concept, stating "I love the founder, I love what she does for this place. I love everybody who volunteers with us."

Participant Two went so far to explain that even in the event rescue work was no longer needed in the world she would like to remain in relationship to the individuals she works with, stating, “I’ve realized that, even if there’s not an animal that needs to be saved or protected or whatever, the people that actually work with the animals are just so kind. Like they’re just so nice.” Further explaining that facing hardships together with the other staff/volunteers within their collective service work has brought many of them closer together—forming a personal bond that propels them forward to better meet their organization’s ultimate mission.

The perception of one’s rescue community being so close as to be considered a type of ‘family’ was a sentiment expressed by one participant—Participant Four. She stated in this regard, “I’ve made friends who have become family. My kids have made lifelong friends themselves. They consider many of the women in the rescue to be their moms as well. You know, they’ve helped me raise my kids.” Later going on to add, “[other volunteer’s name] is my sister from another mister (laughing). Our boys go to parties together (laughing), [...] they’re lifelong buddies, [...] he’s my other son. He can call me for anything.”

It’s important to note that despite numerous participant–volunteers describing their rescue, shelter, or sanctuary communities as a source of love and connection, one participant explained that—while her organization is collaborative and supportive in the service of the animals—she does not personally feel close to other volunteers. She explained:

I don’t necessarily socialize with a lot of people in rescue, I try to avoid making friendships because once you, in my opinion, once you make a friendship it’s harder to do the rescue because now you don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. It’s not about you, it’s about the animals, it’s about what’s best for them. I really just don’t care about the other people as much, so I don’t want to get overly involved, so I keep everybody at

arm's length.

Connection to own family via rescue. While one participant named building her own intentional family through rescue, several participants additionally spoke—either directly or indirectly—to connecting with their nuclear family through their volunteer work as well (N=3). Upon discussing Participant Three's initial motivation to get involved in rescue, she talked about how rescuing animals was a part of who she was (as described above), due in part to the family she grew up in. She reflected on her childhood, stating:

My dad would bring home kittens from his [job site] from people whose cats at the time had kittens and they were looking to give them away. And surprise every now and again, dad would come home, open up his jacket and there's a kitten inside.

This shared interest was also noted by two other participants who actively volunteer with their family members (e.g., wife, children). One of these participants spoke to connecting with her kids via their volunteer work; for example, detailing a recent experience sharing with them upon witnessing one of their foster dogs begin to make positive strides after being otherwise “shut down,” she stated:

Yesterday he started playing with the toy. The kids weren't with me, I videotaped it and right away I sent it to both of them. I saw my son later in the evening and I was like, *did you get the video*, and he was like *yeah that made me so happy*. He was like, *he's becoming a dog, that made me so happy*. I talked to my daughter this morning and I'm like *what did you think of the video*, and she was like *oh my gosh that was the best thing. That was the best thing to see him try to kill that toy*.

Connection to animals. This connection to other people by way of working with animals in need was not the only experience of connection addressed by participants, however, as all five

participants also spoke to the ways in which their rescue, shelter, or sanctuary volunteer work allowed them to connect to the animals they've encountered during their time in service. The theme of connection to animals was broken down into three smaller subthemes that were recurrently addressed across the sample pool: (a) development of attachment bond(s), (b) perception of positive regard/nonjudgement, and (c) increase of positive thoughts/feelings and reduction of negative thoughts/feelings.

Development of an attachment bond(s). All five participants described developing loving, attached relationships to animals that they worked with. For example, Participant One stated, "you get so attached to them" with Participant Two adding, "[I] love working with the animals, and as I said before, form such a bond with them." Participant Four described what it has been like for her working so closely with fosters over the years, explaining:

You're watching, it's like your own children. You watch them take their first steps, you know, you watch them graduate, move off on their own... it's the same kind of thing with your foster. You're watching them do all of these milestones of coming into a new home and turning into a different animal. [...] But it is like watching your own kids because you're watching them go through everything and then graduation is going off to their new home.

Participant Three explained the complexity of saying goodbye to animals they bond with upon their adoption—highlighting that while it is at times challenging, it is predominantly a "happy" experience:

You cry, when some of them touch you a certain way, when you've had them too long, and they're not there anymore. You cry, it's happy tears, sometimes it is sad tears, but it's usually happy tears.

Positive regard/nonjudgment. Some participants attributed this bond, in part, to the nonjudgmental capacity of animals to provide them with unconditional positive regard (N=2).

Participant Two captured this point, explaining:

I feel like they're just giving me unconditional love, because you know, they're not here to just be like, *Whatever, feed me and walk me and then leave me alone*, [instead] they're like, *So, how was your day? I had a great day, I ran around in circles for like an hour, and that was it! And I got excited!* And so, it just feels like, they're helping you get through things even if they don't realize what they're doing. So, like [...] you can be on a walk with [a] dog for not even five minutes and they just look at you like, *I love you so much my heart is going to explode right now* and you're like (smiling) [...]. And you don't feel like you have to worry about what they think about you [...] and your situation, because they're just like *I don't care what happens [...], I love you.*

She went on to add “You could tell them anything about anything, ever, and they'll be like, *it's okay, we're still friends, I'll give you a kiss [...]* and you can sit in my kennel for a little while and we'll forget about whatever that is.”

Increase of positive thoughts/feelings and reduction of negative thoughts/feelings.

Notably, all five participants explored the numerous ways in which they believed their interactions with animals in their volunteer role increased their positive thoughts/feelings and decreased their negative thoughts/feelings.

Participant One referred to his work with animals as a therapeutic experience, explaining, “it's very good therapy. [...] You know, you go there, and not only are you cleaning the cage, you know you're taking care of an animal. You get to play with them, you get to pet them, you get to be emotional.” Several participants furthered this point, explaining that their work with

animals causes a reduction in their stress level both physiologically and psychologically.

Participant Four stated in this regard:

It's definitely calming to be with the animals. There [are] times where I'll be stressing and it's like, I need to just go have some puppy time, and be with these guys, or just relax with my own animals and just settle in... snuggling with them can definitely calm you down.

Participant Two echoed this sentiment, explaining:

I've noticed [...] I do generally feel a lot calmer [upon working with animals,] because I do suffer from a little bit of anxiety so I'm constantly like (gasp), *what's happening now, what's happening*. But once I'm with them it's like nothing matters [...] I stop and [...] I feel a lot [... more relaxed], I'm no longer like (breathing fast).

Participant One described what it's like for him to cuddle his personal rescue cat, explaining, “[H]e comes on top of me, he just lays on me, starts purring, and he just mellows you out. It just relaxes you so much. [...] Your whole body, your whole gesture, your whole body language just totally changes.” Participant Five added “[rescue is] literally like a release for me.” She went on to explain that while her involvement in rescue can at times prompt stress in and of itself, she believes that her stress level is ultimately reduced by engaging in this type of service work, stating “if I don't do it, I'm worse.”

Challenges Experienced by Volunteers During Service Work

Speaking of the stress faced by volunteers working in animal rescue, shelter, or sanctuary settings, participants identified five predominant challenges they face upon engaging in their service work: (a) limited access to resources, (b) hard work, (c) disillusionment, (d) managing

experiences of loss and grief, and (e) negative impacts of their service work on their relationships outside of rescue.

Limited access to resources. Three participants identified their organizations' limited access to resources as a major, ongoing challenge that affects their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Participant One explained:

It takes a lot of money and a lot of resources. Just medicine alone, that's like a big huge thing. Medicine and the vet. You know, cats get HIV. Cats get Giardia. You know, the cats get snap-tested. [...] Everything that they can [contract], any diseases [they have must be treated]. And Panleuk is a big one. So, we [rescue] a cat out there, we don't know what it's got [, we bring] it to the vet, vet does the shots or whatever, it's tested, then it's put on medication. Big bucks.

Two participants noted that they have often felt compelled to contribute their own money to support the animals in their organization's care, with one of the participants stating:

I mean volunteers... we've all bought food for them, for the cats. You know, when the owner, or I should say the founder, will say *listen you know we're running a little short on food, [we can't] feed them because there's not enough, [...]* we'll go out and we'll buy some just so that they can get fed until other people will [...] donate more.

Participant Five added:

Seeing the pleas, the begging every day for fosters to step up. Seeing the begging to cover the costs. Seeing the animals that we don't get in time. That weighs on me. It's emotionally draining to witness that all the time. And there are a few people in the rescue that I've seen at times where they've had to step back and take a break because it, it weighs on you knowing that you think you're doing everything and then something

happens or you miss something or a story comes out [and it feels like you're not doing enough].

This pressure to fill vital demands without access to adequate resources can cause volunteers, at times, to overcommit and overextend their time, energy, and money in order to serve their organization and the animals within it. Participant Five explained:

We're about to hit peak kitten season because of all the ferals and people not TNR-ing [trap neuter releasing]. And you have kittens upon kittens upon kittens, and it's horrible. Because it's just a vicious cycle. Every year we know the spring is kitten season, and we know that we're going to get inundated and we overextend. I will take in litters, and the rescue knows that. I will take in the mom and her five babies, and then I'll take in another litter at the same time and I'll figure it out because I can't [not do it]... there's no way.

In addition to the limited access to financial resources which can impact access to resources such as medical care and food supplies, participants also spoke to experiencing, at times, imperfect physical set ups to accommodate 'their' rescue animals. Participant Four explained:

I mean, it can be a challenge when you have a foster. [...] I just had one recently where she just, she wouldn't go to the bathroom on a leash for me. I live in an apartment so I have to walk the dogs [on leash]. And because she wouldn't go to the bathroom on the leash she was stressing out, and was pacing in the house constantly. And when I could get her to go or she had an accident on the floor she would change [appearing more relaxed]. So, it was definitely the pottying thing that was a problem. I think because she was stressed, my daughter and I tend to be empaths, we were feeling it, and it was just like the kind of situation... I decided to be like okay... I usually don't give up on fosters [... but]

I was just like alright, it's not working for any of us. We're not going to be able to work through this, and she's got to go somewhere else [that has a fenced in yard]. And thankfully the next day she got a new foster home and [... eventually] she was finally adopted. That sometimes is the challenge.

She went on to describe other difficulties managing fosters within her physical space, explaining:

Everybody has to figure out work arounds, and what works in their house. [...] Having to walk them, that's like my biggest challenge. [Be]cause now I have this big dog that doesn't listen to me yet, pulling me and it's snowing out, or pouring rain and I've got to walk the dog [on leash]. [Or considering] where am I putting the crate?

Hard work. Two participants also spoke specifically to the sheer hard work that it takes to commit to volunteering. Participant One explained:

[T]rying to get them homes, trying to find them good homes. [...] You know, we don't adopt out to just anybody, they have to go through a process. So, you know it's just like, it's a challenge. They get these cats off the streets and into people's homes, you know as many as we can get. You know, we try to get as many off the streets as we possibly can. It's impossible to get every single one off the street—hopefully one day we can, you know with the help of other rescues out there and other volunteers. So yeah, it's very challenging.

He went on to state, "it's a task, it takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of dedication." Adding, "It's very challenging what we do." Participant Three described more particularly finding certain components of her volunteer work taxing. She explained:

When you have kittens, they cannot have no one to nurse on: you are it. It's a lack of sleep, it's making sure that they can get the formula, making sure that they eat it. And

when they don't and you don't know what to do, and you have to take a step back and regroup. And then you start all over again. And it's about every two to three hours when they're little until they can start feeding on their own. It's very time consuming. You lose sleep. You can lose yourself if you're not careful.

Disillusionment. Another major challenge acknowledged by four out of the five participants was feeling disillusioned by others (both individuals and systems) that engaged in or otherwise contributed to animal cruelty, including abandonment. Participants described numerous occurrences learning about or witnessing others mistreat animals, including cases of neglect and abuse. One participant, for example, described an experience helping two large cats, that were surrendered to the shelter she volunteers at, from their carriers that were considerably too small for their size, stating:

When she finally surrendered them to the shelter they were stuffed in these tiny carriers that like, they couldn't even move their legs [in]. I had to reach [in] and actually unclip the carriers [to] take the tops off to put them in their new cages. And I was like... it just hit me so hard because [...] you know, you want what's best for those animals and yet they haven't had the best for [X amount of] years.

Participant Five—attempting to make sense out of the mass amount of maltreatment animals have experienced in one form or another—stated:

They didn't ask for any of this—they didn't ask to be domesticated, they didn't ask to have to rely on us, we just arbitrarily said, *Oh you know, dogs and cats are going to make good pets*, and then [people] stop taking care of them and do horrible things to them, honestly, like, it's awful... the things that I've heard about or seen, just (sigh).

She went on to explain, "It makes me want to cry hysterically because I don't like that, I don't

like that we have a system that fails these animals. Because to me that's [what] we are doing is failing them."

Several participants also spoke to entrusting animals to adopters to later find out, in several situations, that the animals were not being adequately cared for despite their best efforts to find them appropriate homes. One participant explained:

But the animals themselves, everything is a benefit to them. There's never, you know, unless we adopt out to a family thinking they're awesome and great and wonderful and then they turn around and they're the worst people who ever walked the face of the earth... and we get the dogs back, shut down, and worse than they were when they left.

And you know, it happens, and it hurts us, it hurts them.

She went on to describe a particular situation in which one of the rescue's young, healthy dogs was adopted out to a family that they "thought was the greatest family that walked the face of the earth" to find out that a few weeks later the family "had him euthanized and insisted on watching." She described this experience as "the most devastating thing in the world to us," explaining that she and her fellow volunteers "still cry" and "mourn him on his anniversary" to this day. In this vein, another participant described the constant worry she experiences that she is going to get a call that an animal she placed is being mistreated and/or brought back, stating:

You always live with a little bit of fear whenever you're a rescue that you're going to get that phone call a couple months or a couple years down the road, *we can't keep so and so anymore, you have to come and take him, you have to find a place for him, we can't do it, we changed our minds, you know, the cat skeeves us out too much because we have to clean the litter box, we don't want the cat so we put the cat outside hoping that [they] would just run away but [they] keep coming back so we figured we'd call you, we're*

moving and if you don't come and take the cat today we're going to have [them] euthanized. You know you live with that as well that that's always a possibility because it's already happened, so you know people suck, and that something like this can happen again, you know it's gonna, you just don't know when, and will you have room, will your rescue have room?

Another participant explained that experiences like this have caused her—at times—to doubt herself and her abilities. She stated:

One time four adoptions I did within a month came back. And it was like, you know what I need to step back from doing the applications, I'm gonna let other people do these applications (laughing), and they can make the decision because I just doubted myself so much. I felt like okay, I'm losing it. I approved these applications, I approved the dogs they were getting, and two weeks later these dogs are back. So, what am I doing?

In addition to the sadness, doubt, worry, and fear experienced by volunteers in connection to their experiences witnessing others (both individuals and the larger society) treat animals poorly, Participant Two described feeling confused, angry, and frustrated at others upon witnessing animals within the shelter she volunteers at being repeatedly passed up. She explained:

We'll occasionally get pure bred dogs in because of [their previous families experiencing] financial problems or [because] they're moving or things like that. [...]
We've had a Bichon Frise—a purebred Bichon Frise—we've had a purebred Newfoundland puppy, and of course people fawn all over them, they go, *Oh my God, they're so beautiful, I want them.* The Newfoundland puppy, one day didn't even [have much time to] eat because she was getting shown so often, that's how popular she was.

'Cause people were like, *I want to see her so bad, I want to take her home.* She got like 30 applications in the span of an hour and yet some of our dogs haven't gotten applications in years, and I'm like you could have that in some of the other dogs and they're like, *No.* [...] I'm like, *You can go look at the other dogs, we have other choices and [dogs] like that have exactly what you want.* Like people want good with other dogs, good with kids and good with cats. We have a dog that's like that and he's a Pitbull like dog, and people are like... *No.*

She explained that upon witnessing this marginalization of certain breeds she has at times experienced overwhelming negative feelings that have prompted physiological responses, going on to describe what it feels like within her body in these moments:

[W]hen your chest gets extremely tight, you're not about to cry but it feels like you want to, you just feel like there's something sitting on your chest, just sitting there and you're like, *I don't know how to get over it because it's just sitting there, and I can't breathe and I can't think, and I can't whatever.*

Managing experiences of loss and grief. Two participants talked about the sadness they experienced when animals they worked with were placed in homes or died. For example, one participant spoke to still grieving the loss of a rescue dog that was euthanized by his newly adoptive owners. Another participant similarly shared her pain when, despite her best efforts, animals in her care had died, describing feelings of sadness, confusion, frustration, and self-blame. She explained:

Some of the challenges are of course when you get kittens when they have no mom, and you have to bottle feed. I've read that the statistics on that is 30% survival rate, that means 70% of the kittens die. We had that in my own house, we had a momma that gave

birth to six, and five died. And then five more kittens were dropped off whose mama had died in the road, and the kittens were rushed here because I had a nursing mama—same mama—and she tried to nurse those and those five died. So, that was a lot of deaths coming, waking up, coming home from work and there's another dead kitten, another dead kitten, another dead kitten, no matter what you do you have a dead kitten... and then the pet store that allows us to put our cats there, they gave a call, somebody dropped off four kittens to them, and of course I went down and I got those four kittens and I brought them back to the house, and she took to them and they took to her, so she eventually had a full litter of kittens, she had her one, those four, and then another one was dropped off to me at my job so that made six. So, she started with six and she ended with six. And they all got adopted including her... But, we had to lose about ten for that to happen. Last year we lost um, I lost at least two to four last year. You know, nothing is ever good. You go to bed and you wake up at three o'clock in the morning and you do the morning bottle feed, and you wake up at six and they're both dead, and you wonder what happened in those three hours, and you blame yourself. You know, why didn't I stay awake, why didn't I do this, what did I do wrong. And there's nothing that you did and you know that, but you still blame yourself. And you still have this little dead body, and you wish something more could've happened.

Participants also described how difficult it can be for them to part ways with animals upon their adoption. Participant Three explained, "You wish you could keep them all. Every rescuer would say the same thing—if I could keep them all I would. And I am no different than anybody else." She added:

The first one is the hardest one. I always tell everyone. The first time I have to come and take that cat from you and bring [them] to [their] family will be the hardest one, because [they're] your first one and you've bonded with [them]. But you're just, your temporary, you're a link in the chain. They're off the street, they have a warm place, they have love, they have food, they have medical care, you're going to provide them with socialization, and then they're going to go to a family, and then you're open to take another. So, for every one that's adopted two more are saved. Is a way I try to look at it.

Several participants—including Participant Three—confessed, however, that they do often consider themselves “failed fosters” as they have on occasion decided to permanently adopt a foster animal they couldn't part with. Upon describing a dog she was currently working with during the time of her interview, Participant Four stated, “I know I'm impacting his life [for the better]. I've changed his life. And everybody's going, *Oh you've done so much for him you have to keep him*, and I'm like, *Well there's a strong possibility that might happen* (laughing).”

Negative impact on relationships outside of rescue. Finally, two participants reported experiences in which they believe their service work negatively impacted their relationships outside of their world of rescue. Participant Four explained:

I've had relationships end because the person I was with didn't get it [her service work], and didn't understand... *Well I can't spend Saturday with you, I'm running an event.*

They'd be like, *But I need you.* And I'd be like, *No, you're a grown adult, you don't need me, these animals need me, they don't have a voice. So, you can see me after the event* (laughing) *or not see me at all.* You know, so I've had a couple of relationships end that way. Family members will be like, *Oh you know the party starts at 3:00?* [And I'd say], *Okay, well my event's not over until 4:00 and I have no one to cover me, so, I'll see you*

after. And sometimes they're understanding, and they're okay with it. You know, and other times they're like, *No, you have to be there at that time*. And I'm like, *I can't, I'm committed to this and that's it*.

She went on to explain that it's been important for her to find a balance in her social and volunteer commitments when able, stating:

I have stepped down [from my commitments with the rescue a bit]. I was an event leader for [many] years, I did almost every Sunday for [many] years. And [during all of those] years if I took off any Sundays that was a lot. Yeah (laughing). Plus doing, sometimes on Saturdays I'd do big outdoor events like [X, X, X] and it was getting overwhelming. It was getting to a point where I wasn't having a social life. I had stepped back from... unfortunately the church I was going to had to change their mass times which conflicted with my event times. And because nobody else was stepping up to run the events, church went on the back burner. And I finally made the decision that, no, I need to do the church thing too. So, I stepped down from being an event leader unless they really needed me, or [certain events] I still agreed to do those.

Participant Five also shared the stress her foster work has occasionally added within her relationships with her family—two and four legged—explaining:

It does cause stress in my household because you know, it's an added pressure of things we have to do and commitments we have to make. We have a [young child], and [over 10] of our own pets that may not be happy. If we have a foster causing fights and stuff like that it can cause stress at home, but I try not to really let that bother me too much [...]. But it is part of why I tend to foster cats more consistently than dogs, because cats are easier in my house. And then one of my own dogs, she actually has resource guarding

issues [reactivity to others upon attempting to ‘guard’ resources such as food, toys, or locations], so she doesn’t like new dogs in the house. So, I have to be careful what dogs I volunteer for and things like that. My selection for dog fostering is a lot more strict because they have to be okay with cats, they have to be okay with dogs, they have to be okay with my (child). Where with a cat if I need to, I can lock them in one of my bedrooms or something until they’re adopted and it’s not like a huge issue. I can’t do that with a dog. So that plays into it... the social and the emotional draining from it, and what’s funny is that I think it affects my husband more than me, but in a different way. He’ll tell me like, *You’re so stressed out with everything going on, why don’t you step back from fostering, because it’s stressing you.* When he says that I’m like *No!* I know how stressed I am and how upset I get, but it’s literally like a release for me, if I don’t do it, I’m worse, and I know that probably sounds really weird, but even though it may do all of that it’s like... if I don’t do all of that I would be worse.

Volunteers’ Perception of their Impact on Rescue, Shelter, or Sanctuary Animals

Shifting from participants meaning making about the beneficial impacts as well as the challenges they experience within their volunteer role(s), participants additionally detailed their perception of the impact of their service work on the animals within their rescues, shelters, or sanctuaries. Participants identified both beneficial impacts they believed animals were receiving as a result of their service as well as some potential challenges they, too, may experience.

Beneficial impacts to animals. All five participants identified perceived beneficial impacts to animals, including: (a) increased physical safety and an internal sense of security, (b) positive socialization to humans and other animals, (c) improvements to physical health, (d) opportunities for adoption, and (e) a general increase in positive feelings/decrease in negative

feelings.

Increased physical safety and internal sense of security. All five participants identified increases in real and perceived physical safety as a major benefit experienced by animals within their organization as a result of theirs and others service work. As has been noted, numerous participants expressed knowing that their work literally “saves” animals lives—having a direct effect on animals’ survival. Participant Three explained, “You know what you did. You know that the animal was no longer on the street, you know that it’s not going to die.” Participant One added, “they (i.e., animals) don’t want to be outside, fighting the elements, fighting with each other, they just want to be loved and taken care of.” Additionally noting, “It’s like they know when they get [... adopted], they know that’s where they’re gonna be for the rest of their lives,” explaining “I think when they get to their home they’re like, *Ah! I’m not outside, I’m not fighting for food, getting killed...*”

Participant Two similarly shared that even before animals get adopted they start feeling increasingly safe/secure within her organization’s physical space due in large part to the staff/volunteer presence. She explained:

I feel like they feel more secure, especially seeing the same faces over and over again, because there’s some places where you go and it’s a different person every day and it’s like, *What?* But having the same people come over repeatedly and eventually they’re like, *Oh, okay.* Especially the ones who were previously abused or neglected, or had never seen a person in their lives, they’re like, *What is that?* Eventually they start realizing, *Maybe this isn’t so bad.*

Positive socialization to humans and other animals. This process, in which animals become increasingly aware of their own safety in the presence of others (human and non-human

alike), consequently allows/teaches them to interact with others safely. Such positive socialization was identified by all five volunteers as a benefit in and of itself experienced by their animal counterparts. For example, Participant One explained, “We socialize ‘our’ cats. They’re very friendly. None of ‘our’ cats will bite you. None of ‘our’ cats will scratch you. They just want to love.” Participant Three described this process of socialization:

When a cat comes in and [they’re] scared the easiest way, the easiest thing to do is to leave them alone for a little while, let them adjust, him or her. Let them have their exploring. Everything is positive reinforcement and nothing negative, no pointing, yelling and screaming, they’re already scared enough. And get down to their level, be on the floor. Just talk kindly, talk soft. Find something that they’re not scared of. [...] I will sing stupid songs. I will brush them with a comb. Anything that gets them contact so that they know that whatever I’m doing is not meant to hurt, it’s meant to feel good.

Participant Five described socializing cats as one of her strongest assets as a volunteer, explaining:

When it comes to the cats and if they do have a cat that is very shy or needs socializing, they will ask me to take it on because I have had a pretty good success rate with it. I did have one mom cat that came to me with her babies. The babies got adopted right away as the kittens always get adopted before the moms do. She was extremely shy, I didn’t even let my daughter in to go spend time with her because it would just set her back. [...] So, I would go in [by myself and] I would sit with her, I would bring wet food with me to try to associate positive with her. I worked with her for months and she started really coming around with me and then I actually had to bring her to the... one of the medical coordinators because she kept sneezing and having issues and stuff and when I brought

her I said you know she tends to be very shy at first but if you give her time she warms up, it's something I've been working with her on, and they actually messaged me and they were like, *No she adjusted right away, whatever you did to work with her worked because she's adjusting much more quickly now.* [That cat ended up getting adopted shortly after that.] So yeah (smiling). So definitely, you can have that impact.

Improvements to physical health. Four participants explained that a part of their job as a volunteer is to help improve animals' physical health, including helping with access to medical treatment. Participant One described the physical transformation he has witnessed in the animals at his rescue, explaining that he has witnessed their coats get "thicker" and "shinier" with good care. Participant Five added that within her rescue, "If they're underweight, they're getting fed to be to where they should be. If they're overweight, they're getting their food cut back." Several participants additionally described their protocol for getting animals' medical attention. For example, Participant Five explained:

All of our animals within the first [week] of being here go to our vet to be looked at, so if any medical attention is needed they're getting that. And then if during the course of them [being] with us we're seeing [any health] issues the rescue gets us medication, we're able to take care of any of that stuff.

Participant Four described the improvements she has witnessed with one of her foster dogs since he had been in her care, stating:

Like right now I have a foster who came off the van [a few weeks] ago, shut down, skinny as can be, scared, all kinds of health issues. And in the [few] weeks he's been in my house I've watched him flourish. He's [very young], he came to my house and acted like he was 15. In [just a few] weeks now, suddenly yesterday he started playing. He

didn't even know how to play when he came. He started snuggling with my dog, where before then they got along but they didn't snuggle. He's gaining weight and doing well. She added, speaking on a larger scale about all of the animals she and her fellow volunteers work with: "We're helping them heal... any medical issues, mental issues, all of that. It's an amazing feeling and sometimes overwhelming to think about how we have affected their lives."

Opportunities for adoption. All five participants identified efforts at adopting out animals as another significant impact of their volunteer work. Participants explained that one of their collective missions in their service work is to take animals out of harm's way and place them with loving families where the 'fit' is good all around. Participant Two explained:

As much as we love to get them adopted as fast as possible, we also want to get them to the best home possible. So, the more you get to know the animal, and then someone comes in and says, *I want this and this and this*, and you're like, *I got the perfect dog!* and it improves their life a lot more because they can get out of the shelter and go home and be spoiled brats... which is what they deserve.

Participant Four added:

Any animal that we work with whether it's just as a leader at an event for the day or being their foster, we're affecting their life. We're affecting change on their life, because we're making the decision of where they're going to spend the rest of their life.

This process of adopting animals out is multifold, including but not limited to getting the animal in the best physical health possible, increasing their sense of security and positive socialization with others, and providing opportunities for training to increase their odds of being adopted. Participant Two explained that a big part of her work is providing animals with this basic training, stating:

Well, the protocol that we have in place to work with the dogs especially... you get them to use their commands as much as they can. Because the more that they know, the more adoptable they sort of are. So sometimes you can see that start to set in. *So okay, when I get through the door I have to sit, and then I have to wait until the door opens, and then you say I can go. Then I have to sit and I have to wait until we can cross the street, and then I have to sit and wait before I can cross the street again.* So, then they start kind of learning a foundation of—this is good behavior and this is not good behavior—so it makes them a little more adoptable, as in they know what they should and shouldn't be doing. But it's not a punishment type of way, it's more of a like, *Hey, you're not doing the right thing but I'll bring you back and teach you how to do it,* so they can go, *Ohhhhhhh, I know what I'm doing now.*

Another major benefit for animals through the adoption process is the effort of volunteers to get to know each individual animal well enough to make a suitable long-term match. Participant Five explained:

I hope I'm a good advocate for them so that [...] if I think an adopter isn't the right fit for an animal I'll speak up and I'll tell them I don't think it's the right fit, because one of the biggest things with our rescue is that we advocate for the animal. We're not placing to place. So, if we don't think a fit is good we won't do it. So aside from literally getting them here from wherever they're coming from and having them here I just try to advocate for them and what's best for them to make sure that they're getting the best home when they do get adopted.

General increase in positive feelings/decrease in negative feelings. Unanimously, all five participants additionally identified recognizing an increase in many animals' positive

feelings and a decrease in their negative feelings after the point of being rescued. Participant Three explained:

I think all animals know when someone is there to help them. I think a lot of times they're just scared and they just need that moment, that kind hand, a way that you speak to them, they just need that. They know, when they've been rescued when they're off the streets, they know.

Participant Four added:

They will generally start to relax themselves [over time]. When they see that you're not stressed, you're not going to harm them, other things are not going to hurt them, you know the big scary truck going by is not coming for them. You do, you can watch them relax. And they're grateful, when they do, people say animals can't tell gratitude, oh no they certainly can, you know? You can see the changes in them when you work with them.

This gradual movement toward relaxation was described by Participant Three as a physiological, psychological, and social process:

The more scared they are the faster the heart rate, the more they pant, the faster the breathing. The more trust that they come to for you—whoever the foster is—that relaxes, and you can see it in their body. You can see their body give in and when you have that moment, when you reach out and you're waiting and they chose to lean forward to make contact with you, verses you making contact with them, that's magic.

Participant One further explained that when some animals are finally placed in their “forever home,” their fear dissipates and “you can just see it in their faces that they're so happy.”

Challenges to animals. All participants noted beneficial impacts to animals through their participation in volunteer work and recognized the overwhelmingly positive influence rescues, shelters, and sanctuaries have had and continue to have on animals. At the same time, they identified significant challenges to these animals including: (a) challenging conditions within the organizational setting/context; (b) managing frequent, at times high stress, transitions; and (c) navigating experiences of trauma including cases of abuse and neglect.

Challenging conditions within the organizational setting/context. Four participants noted ways in which physical constraints—including the setting/context where animals are located—sometimes lead to stress for the animals. One participant explained, for example, that some of ‘their’ cats that are available for adoption are placed in cages within pet stores in hopes of increasing the chances of them being viewed by potential adopters. This set up might increase chances for adoption, but it also means that cats are “in a cage” and can “get very skittish.” He further explained, “They’re trapped in a cage 24/7. Very little human interaction except for people putting a hand in the cage or when we handle them.” Participants four and five described how they also have to seclude foster animals at times within their homes depending on the constellation of other beings in the household (e.g., to maintain safety if one or more of the animals is reactive toward other animals).

Participant Two additionally described the challenge experienced by animals when they don’t get adopted quickly or at all, consequently needing to stay within their rescue, sanctuary, or shelter for a long time, noting:

Some of these [...] dogs have been here for years, like I said, one of my favorite dogs was here for almost six years and another dog has been here for a couple months and she’s just sitting there, like, *I’m a good dog, hello.*

Interestingly, the same participant observed the experience of animals in the opposite position (i.e., animals in high demand, such as purebred dogs, who are shown to interested, prospective adopters repeatedly throughout a day) as a challenge in and of itself. She stated, “I’m like let the dog live for a second, because the dog’s like, *I just came out for somebody let me go to bed*, but like no they have to get shown again.”

Managing frequent, at times high stress, transitions. Though the process of rescuing animals from dangerous situations is clearly a benefit to them overall, all five participants noted the considerable stress animals not uncommonly experience through the numerous transitions they endure during the rescue, shelter, or sanctuary process, starting prior to their rescue and continuing, at least for some, even after they have been adopted successfully. Participant Five, for example, stated:

It’s stressful. They come up from (the South) on a transport van, so they’re caged in a tiny van for [most of 10] plus hours for a drive up here. Then they’re forced into a house that they don’t know, with people and animals that they don’t know, and they’re stressed. It can cause physical symptoms. I’ve had cats get sick from stress. So, we have pretty standard rules about decompression time. They vary between cat and dog because they’re different... those animals react differently. But the rescue does, we have rules that we’re supposed to follow to try to minimize the stress on the animals, because it is stressful. They have the stress of the adoption events. So, like the cats, they go and they get put in a tiny little crate... which cats normally are never crated so that stresses them out. Then they have all these people walking around their crates poking at them—which we try to tell people please don’t put your fingers in their crates. So that, it definitely, they have a lot of stress. The dogs at the adoption events are not how they are in a house. They’re in a

small environment with six, seven, eight other dogs and a ton of people and noise, and some dogs are reactive, and they're in a small space so they're reactive to the other dogs, and it causes stress. Where at home maybe they wouldn't be like that. So, there's definitely, the animals absolutely have stress. I mean I'm sure it's less stress than a shelter, being stuck in a shelter and not getting adopted, but for the most part they're decompressing in our homes and all the fosters are aware of those challenges, but I would say absolutely they have stress and that affects them.

Participant Three similarly added:

[They experience the] challenge of a different environment. If you have a foster whose used to being here for however long—two, three, four, five weeks—if they're used to that and now they have to go into a new environment, a new family, you can only imagine if you put yourself in their place, this person you've been living with is all of a sudden putting you into a cage, taking you for a ride, bringing you into an environment you know nothing about, with these other strange biped people that you know nothing about, and you're watching as I walk out the door and I'm leaving you behind. Abandonment. So, I tell all adopters there's an adjustment period. They're not used to your house, they're not used to your way, they're not used to your voice. So, it's going to take time. They're going to hide, they can poop outside the litter box. You have to give them that opportunity to adapt to you. Verses what they know with me.

Adding to this point, Participant Four explained:

Well definitely sometimes you'll see animals lose their house breaking. They start having accidents. You know, they could end up becoming withdrawn, because they're getting bounced back and forth. Taking longer to adjust. You know, they do just fine when they

first come but then, they're on adopter number two and foster number three and they're taking longer to adjust. Or they're scared because they feel like, okay, when am I going to get shipped off again. So, they're taking even longer to feel comfortable. And they just need a routine.

She went on to emphasize the importance of volunteers endeavoring the best they can to mitigate this increase in stress/distress, stating:

That's when we say, they're broken, and we have to take them back and we have to start them all over again, and get back to basics with them sometimes. And it's what we tell adopters [too]. If they start doing that type of stuff then you got to go back to basics. Even if it's a five year old dog you've got to treat them like they're a puppy. Take them out as if you're house breaking a puppy, and put them in a crate when you're not with them, and that type of stuff, to get them back to the point again.

Navigating trauma including cases of abuse and neglect. Finally, four participants discussed the enduring impact of abuse and neglect on some of 'their' animals—describing some of the challenges they experienced throughout their lives after experiencing trauma(s). While many participants spoke to their experience working with animals who had experienced trauma prior to their rescue, which created difficulty in some of their lives moving forward, some additionally spoke to unfortunate events in which 'their' animals were maltreated after the point of rescue. Participant Five, for example, detailed an experience in which an animal she'd fostered, who had been adopted, was abandoned by his adoptive family, stating:

We've had cats that've gotten abandoned at the [pet store] that we work with, that we host events at. [...] Most recently [X] was a cat that I had and he was abandoned at the doors of [store] just in his carrier as the woman just ran away, and he was literally the

sweetest cat, he was one of the most docile cats of all, all he wanted was love. [He was very young], covered in fleas and dirt and not cared for and just dumped like [he was] nothing.

Measures utilized to assess impacts to animals. Participants discussed their strategies for determining the positive and negative impact of their work on the animals they care for. All participants described observations of animals' behaviors and physicality in a given moment and over time, relying on their own experience and the report of others, including medical staff, trainers, and adopters, as their primary means for assessing an animal's wellbeing.

Behavioral observations. All five participants provided examples of ways in which they have determined—utilizing their own behavioral observations grounded in their personal knowledge of animal behavior—impacts to animals. Participant Three, for example, explained:

They [cats] come closer on their own. When I go into the room and I get down and I call them and I see them, they don't run as fast. They make eye contact more. They stay in a place a little bit longer, a second longer than the day before. And then I can reach out and maybe they don't jump off the chair, you know they stay a little bit. My hand gets closer and closer and closer and then one day I can pet them. You know, it's a slow process, it's nothing fast. It's a slow process, you're earning their trust and once you've earned it, you're golden.

Participant Four similarly shared:

When they [dogs] start leaning against you, the tail starts wagging, they sit and look at you like you hung the moon and stars, they're giving you kisses, they're listening to you when you give them a command, they want to please you. You've made that connection, now they want to please you so they're gonna do what you tell them to do, or not do. You

can feel it. We watch dogs at events who have come in just totally stressed out and by the end of the event watching their cues of what's getting to them, what's bothering them, and helping them through that. You can watch it even in a single day, in a four-hour event, change.

Though often these behavioral changes are observed by the participants themselves, Participant One explained that he commonly gets reports by adopters describing the positive progress 'their' animals are experiencing as well, stating:

We tell them, listen, when they get home they're so much better, they're like totally different. And we've heard that many times. People tell us, *Oh my God, the cat's like loving... [he or she] jumps on me, [they're] purring up a storm, [they're] playing.*

Highlighting how different these behaviors are from the animals' initial behaviors upon first being adopted.

Physical observations. Four participants also described observing physical changes in animals as indicators of positive or negative change. Examples of such changes include: shinier coats upon receiving good care; increased and decreased panting attendant to more and less stress; and demonstrable weight gain or loss.

Discussion

The collective narratives of the five individual participants interviewed for this study simultaneously highlighted their unique and shared experiences of volunteerism within animal rescue, shelter, or sanctuary organizations—working primarily with companion animals (dogs and/or cats)—within the Northeastern region of the United States. Consistent with standing research on the salutary effects of engaging in prosocial behaviors (e.g., volunteering) on both *helpers* and *recipients of help*, this study provides further preliminary support for this claim to be

extended to include mixed-species populations (i.e., human helpers and animal recipients of help).

This study's sample pool reported shared experiences feeling increasingly self-efficacious, describing experiences witnessing their positive impact on others, feeling accomplished by causing these impacts, and developing heightened knowledge, skill, experience, and confidence in their own abilities. These findings are similar with those of Thoits and Hewitt (2001) who found positive relationships between time spent volunteering and reported levels of self-esteem, satisfaction, and sense of autonomy/control. Interestingly, this study's participants built upon this existing research to additionally describe ways in which their volunteer work contributed to the development of tangible knowledge and skill needed to proficiently fulfill their roles/responsibilities within their volunteer organizations, which at times extended beyond their service work and beneficially impacted their pursuit of goals in other endeavors (e.g., within the workplace).

Participants in this study also shared feeling, in various ways, internally fulfilled by their service work directed toward animals—noting feeling a sense of purpose and direction within their volunteer work, feeling rewarded from their volunteer work, and identifying as a volunteer—which coincides with the field of research on human-directed prosociality, including Bryan et al.'s (2014) research which asserts that individuals who identify with their role as helpers are more likely to feel motivated to help and find a sense of purpose and/or higher meaning out of their helping experience(s). Participants' meaning making about their volunteer work in these regards (i.e., finding purpose and order within their role, feeling fulfilled by their service work, identifying with their role as volunteers, and holding hopeful worldviews where they are capable of and accomplished in affecting positive change for themselves and the

animals/world around them), may contribute to an increased sense of stability and overall wellbeing in their lives.

Most participant–volunteers additionally spoke to developing heightened resilience by way of their engagement in service work directed toward animals in need, including tolerating negative affect in the moment, bouncing back in the face of situational hardship, and adopting more positive views about themselves. This is consistent with research that suggests prosociality is linked to the utilization of positive coping (Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, & Reed, 2003), as well as research that indicates that attachment to animals, or pet ‘ownership,’ can serve as a protective resiliency factor, boosting development of adaptive coping strategies (Mueller & Callina, 2014; Thompson et al., 2014). This study highlights, however, some of the unique ways that engagement in this particular form of prosociality directed toward animals may lend itself toward positive coping and resilience as manifested behaviorally, cognitively, and affectively—something that has yet to be adequately explored and warrants further research.

Finally, many participants also reported feeling positively connected to others in their service work—speaking to both the volunteer community and the animals they work with and for. This finding was unsurprising, as there has been an abundance of research to suggest that voluntary participation and membership within volunteer organizations (namely looking at human-directed models of volunteerism) can generate a sense of support and belonging, which contributes to other beneficial wellbeing effects (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). This greater sense of connection also adds to the standing body of literature on the human–animal bond, suggesting that interspecies relationships can improve relational competence with both similar and dissimilar others (Chardonens, 2009). Although not fully captured in this study, some participant–volunteers spoke to ways in which their volunteer work—including their relationship

with rescue animals—worked as a catalyst toward improved connection to other human staff/volunteers. This area of relational functioning (i.e., the ability of interspecies relationships to promote, for some, connection to other humans) has been explored in clinical settings—for example, examining dynamics among psychotherapist, client, and therapy dog triads (Schneider & Harley, 2006; Sori & Hughes, 2014)—but has not been robustly extended to contexts of animal-directed prosociality within animal rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings.

Bound within these various superordinate themes participant–volunteers highlighted ways in which their volunteer work has at times elicited positive feelings (e.g., increased happiness and pride) and reduced negative feelings (e.g., decreased stress and anxiety)—which they described is sometimes expressed physiologically (e.g., decreased respiratory rate). These reports are aligned with the larger body of research on both human-oriented prosociality as well as the human–animal bond already discussed.

Through the perspective of participant–volunteers, animals within rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings also receive a range of benefits from volunteers’ engagement in service work. These benefits include: (a) increased physical safety and an internal sense of security, (b) positive socialization to humans and other animals, (c) improvements to physical health, (d) opportunities for adoption—including access to training, and (e) a general increase in perceived positive feelings/decrease in negative feelings. These results are broadly consistent with the current body of knowledge about some of the beneficial impacts of the human–animal bond on animals’ wellbeing (Bergamasco et al., 2010; Chardonens, 2009; Hatch, 2007).

All participants additionally identified experiencing challenges as a result of their volunteer work, however—including, for example, having limited access to resources, engaging in objectively hard work, feeling at times disillusioned by others, managing experiences of loss

and grief, and experiencing occasional negative impacts to their relationships outside of rescue. These stressors are often paired with the challenges that may affect the animals they are attempting to serve (e.g., challenging conditions within the organizational setting/context, managing frequent at times high stress transitions, and navigating trauma including cases of abuse and neglect). Yet, upon asking participants if they intended to continue their volunteer work moving forward, each and every participant-volunteer unequivocally expressed that they would, describing the ways that the ‘goods’ outweighed these more challenging sides of their service work. Participant Three, for example, stated “[Rescue’s] not something that is a passing for me, it is something that is a lifelong thing for me. I will always be involved in rescue one way or the other.” Participant Four similarly shared, “[Rescue is] just something that will always be part of [me] now.” Upon asking participants why they planned to continue in their service work, several participants underlined the numerous benefits both the animals and they receive from their engagement in this work. Participant One explained in this regard, “I love the impact that it has on the animals and the impact that happens with us. And, you know, it’s just, I love doing it.”

Mechanisms of Change

While the mechanisms underlying the occurrence of these many reciprocal benefits to both humans and animals within animal rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings remain an ongoing exploration, one explanation may lie simply in our interconnectedness. Within the ecopsychological framework, we can understand the profound capacity of humans and animals to form meaningful connections with others (including with each other in interspecies relationships). Such bonds may be further strengthened upon navigating adversity together while fostering mutual respect, safety, compassion, and understanding.

By shifting from wary strangers at first meeting—often under chaotic conditions—when

an animal is rescued and brought to a shelter or a foster home, volunteers and animals become familiar to one another, and through daily care, socialization, and training, develop a more stable and predictable relationship. In this gradual transition, two beings are given an opportunity to learn about each other and bond—with humans, dogs, and cats (the focus of this particular study), this process largely occurs through limbic resonance and regulation.

Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000) explained, that mammals' limbic brains generate “a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states.” (p. 63). Further stating, “When we meet the gaze of another, two nervous systems achieve a palpable and intimate apposition. So familiar and expected is the neural attunement of limbic resonance” (Lewis et al., 2000, p. 63). They explain that utilizing this ability to attune to one another, mammals are in a constant relational dance to connect in an attempt to maintain stability:

The reciprocal process occurs simultaneously: the first [mammal] regulates the physiology of the second, even as he himself is regulated. Neither is a functioning whole on his own; each has open loops that only somebody else can complete. Together they create a stable, properly balanced pair of organisms. And the two trade their complementary data through the open channel their limbic connection provides. (p. 85)

While humans and animals may have different methods of connecting with others (with humans often utilizing some language), mammals overall are fundamentally relational beings that have parallel internal processes, where connection to others significantly shape their brains and subsequently their lived experiences.

Human helpers and animal recipients of help may thus attune to and regulate one another—a particularly important feat when one or both parties has undergone a recent stress

and/or trauma. Upon discussing the essential factors needed to treat the negative effects of trauma within human populations, Judith Herman (1992) stated, “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (p. 133). I would argue that this reality extends to animal populations as well. As many of the animals in rescues, shelters, and sanctuaries experience significant stress prior to being successfully adopted, it is crucial that they be given access to nurturing other(s). Luckily, mammals (including humans) have a preexisting urge to nurture—a method of social bonding. Affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (1998) explained:

Recent brain investigations suggest that social bonding is rooted in various brain chemistries that are normally activated by friendly and supportive forms of social interaction. [...] such urges are controlled by neuropeptides such as oxytocin and prolactin, as well as endogenous opioids such as endorphins [...]. Animal research indicates that both brain opioid and oxytocin circuits are activated by various pleasurable pro-social activities [...]. Accordingly, such neurochemical changes in the brain may promote feelings of security [...], nurturant [...] behaviors and related social emotions, perhaps even love. (p. 247)

By engaging in nurturing prosocial behaviors, human nurturers are receiving gains as well. These connections offer security/stability over time, a core mission of living beings—they offer individuals opportunities to belong, to feel seen and heard, to witness their positive impact on themselves and others, to persevere in the face of hardship, and to otherwise exist within a context or role that gives way for meaning (e.g., identity, purpose). In other words, by helping others you are being helped in return—further highlighting the parallel relational process at work and at play in the accounts of the participants of this study.

Social/Clinical Relevance

Implications for animal welfare initiatives. There are many segments of society that may benefit from a deeper understanding of the impacts of engaging in prosocial behaviors directed toward animals. However, within the realm of animal welfare initiatives (e.g., shelters, rescues, sanctuaries), two major groups are most directly affected: volunteers and animals.

Implications for volunteers. As this study's results indicate that engaging in volunteer work (i.e., prosocial behaviors) directed toward animals may reap a variety of benefits for not only the animals that are being served, but also for the volunteers who are serving them, this research may be utilized to further our understanding of the varied benefits of animal-oriented volunteer work. This research may also further affirm/substantiate the tireless work of animal welfare organizations and their volunteers by honoring their expertise, endeavoring to understand their personal experiences, and promoting their voices within the context of psychological discourse—a previously under studied and supported population within psychology. In addition, it is possible that the findings from this research may be utilized to improve recruitment efforts in finding committed volunteers and increase the likelihood that volunteers stay invested. By utilizing public-awareness campaigns that speak both to the need of volunteer activity within animal welfare initiatives and the dual benefits that both the animals and they may receive, interested parties may more readily seek out engagement and stay engaged in volunteering.

Furthermore, by better understanding the ways in which volunteers are beneficially impacted by their service work, as well as the common challenges they experience in their day-to-day, efforts may be taken to modify—as relevant/appropriate—organizational systems to increase these positive effects and reduce when able these negative effects/challenges to increase the occurrence of positive volunteer outcomes. For example, research conducted on volunteer

burnout highlights the risks of volunteering without work/life balance, which includes adequate access to self-care and organizational support (Harmon-Darrow & Xu, 2018). Within this study participants with long-term commitments described their efforts to balance their volunteer responsibilities with their other life demands. All participants noted maintaining some flexibility within their schedule—at times volunteering more or less than other times given a range of situational factors present—and recognizing the importance of this balance, potentially in order to minimize their risk of burnout when possible. Participant Three explained:

You cannot give up the [other] things that you love to do, or allow yourself the opportunity to have a life outside of rescue. It's okay to go out and spend two hours on yourself going out to dinner with friends or something. It's okay. You don't have to devote every waking minute to rescue. And that I think is the hardest part for people who first come into rescue, [they] think that every second if they're not doing their job, if they're not doing something with the rescue than they are letting somebody down. And they're not. But it takes time for people to learn that.

While it is tremendously important that volunteers are taking time and care to consider and implement strategies to maintain their own personal balance, it is also crucial that organizations implement policies to support their volunteers by providing measures to ensure their safety and overall wellbeing. For example, by providing volunteers access to ongoing supervision within their volunteer role, they can be in contact with an identified other or others as a source of support and troubleshooting while managing challenging elements of their roles/responsibilities (e.g., working with traumatized animals, experiencing failed adoptions, witnessing the death of beloved animals).

Future research may also more specifically explore if there is a potential tipping point of

benefits received for volunteers (i.e., is there a point in which benefits become minimized and challenges are experienced as more salient?). In addition to better understanding volunteer experiences overall, this avenue of exploration may shed light on potential clinical implications—both positive and negative—of volunteering within animal shelter, rescue, and sanctuary contexts, and further allow for the creation and implementation of efforts at optimizing volunteer experiences. As the effective pursuit of animal welfare initiatives' collective mission is contingent, in part, on the wellbeing of involved volunteers, it is essential that volunteer support and satisfaction remain a core area of continued consideration.

Implications for animals. Vulnerable, abused, neglected, and abandoned animals might also benefit from this research. With an estimated 7.6 million animals—only counting dogs and cats—entering shelters each year (ASPCA, 2017b), there is a constant demand for volunteer service nationwide. If this research leads to improvements in volunteer recruitment efforts and subsequently higher numbers of active volunteers (as postulated above), this will likely have a considerable effect on shelter/rescue/sanctuary animal wellbeing (e.g., daily care, access to resources, chance of being adopted).

In addition to improving the lives/experiences of shelter/rescue/sanctuary animals, this research may have implications for the wellbeing of animals at large. As animals have historically been victim to widespread oppression by human forces (e.g., abuse and neglect, factory farming, habitat loss, puppy mills, etc.), with limited rights and marginalized social locations, they are a group in pressing need of aid. By including animals in scholarly discourse, psychologists have the power to advance the position of animals both within the field of psychology and within the overall social world (e.g., increased awareness of animal need, increased access to basic rights).

By addressing these injustices and advancing animals' position, we also positively affect humans and the rest of our natural world. As injustices directed toward animals are frequently associated with injustices directed toward humans—for example, there is a well-documented connection between animal abuse and other forms of domestic violence (Lockwood & Arkow, 2016)—when we help animals, we will inevitably affect their helpers and the natural world in turn, consistent with the ecopsychological model which asserts the interconnectedness of us all.

Finally, as participants identified behavioral and physical observations as the means by which they assessed changes in animal wellbeing—a valid and valuable measure in this regard given an appropriate foundation in animal health, behavior, and general care—organizations may consider (as relevant/appropriate) providing routine, ongoing trainings on these matters to assure that participants are utilizing a common base of knowledge and language to best care for the animals they are working to serve. Careful and ongoing assessment of health and wellbeing of animals improves care, increases confidence in intervention strategies, and offers important outcome data needed by funding sources.

It might be useful to standardize these observational assessment procedures with checklists or other documentation strategies. Further, it may be wise to explore with volunteers if they believe their organization would benefit from the utilization of more and/or different outcome measures to assess changes to animal wellbeing during the course of their service work, to help maximize potential positive outcomes for the animals involved.

Implications for psychological practice. As has been highlighted above, the main intentions of this study were (a) attending to research gaps connecting the fields of prosociality and human–animal bonds; and (b) exploring the mutually beneficial implications of human enacted prosocial behavior directed toward animals in need within rescue, shelter, and sanctuary

settings. The findings of this study have some interesting possible clinical implications and raise a few questions that future research might address.

A growing area of psychological research and practice explores the multitude of benefits of Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAIs). One of the concerns about some AAIs, however, is the way they might pose a serious risk of exploiting animals for human-gain if implemented without consideration of the involved animals' welfare. This is a critically important area of concern that has been long overdue in receiving attention. This research may be used as further acknowledgement of the tremendous value/significance of animals, and the ways in which helping them can actually increase these valuable effects for all involved—demonstrating the need for research and practice that honors, respects, and serves all. One example of a model clinical program that dovetails with these findings is Green Chimneys (n.d.-a)—the day and residential school for children struggling with a wide range of presenting concerns, and a rehabilitation and/or home for a variety of wildlife, companion, and farm animals, that was previously described. Like other organizations focusing on more egalitarian arrangements for clients and therapy animals, Green Chimneys has integrated mutually therapeutic practices for their vulnerable humans and animals within the clinical enterprise.

Limitations and Future Directions

Given the small sample size called for in IPA studies, the transferability of this study is limited—this is a common critique of qualitative methodology offset by the depth of the data collected. Furthermore, within this already small sample pool, diversity among participants was limited in regards to self-identified race/ethnicity (with four out of five participants identifying as White or European), gender (with four out of five participants identifying as ciswomen) and socioeconomic status (with four out of five participants identifying as middle class). Participants

were also limited in regard to geographic location (all residing and volunteering within the Northeastern region of the United States) as well as the types of animals they were regularly serving within their organization's care (mostly dogs and cats).

In addition, as participants self-selected to participate in this study, it is possible that their level of motivation to discuss their experiences volunteering may be higher than the general population of volunteers. With these sample drawbacks in mind future studies would benefit from seeking increasingly diverse pools (as it relates to diversity within participant-volunteers, types of animals being served, and organizational set ups) as well as potentially utilizing alternative methodologies that would allow for larger sample sizes, including quantitative and mixed methods approaches, to ascertain if these findings can be robustly generalized. It may also be interesting to examine potential salutary effects for non-volunteer populations including directors, staff, medical care providers, community members (e.g., pet stores where animals are housed), and adoptive families.

A pre- and post-test study that assesses wellbeing to self and animals across the dimensions highlighted in this study's results, prior to engagement in animal welfare initiatives (i.e., before someone ever engages in helping work directed toward animals) as compared to during the course of their service work, would be a particularly interesting avenue of research. Additionally, conducting longitudinal research would allow us to ascertain if and how time spent volunteering may impact the general wellbeing of both the human helpers and the animal recipients of help over months and years.

Another potential limitation that emerged within this study is the relative dearth of detailed responses provided by participants when addressing more introspective questions, such as recognizing physiological changes within their bodies before, during, or after engagement in

their volunteer work. This may have been caused by the occasionally retrospective focus of this study, which asked participants to recall past thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences they or the animals they work with may have had at a given time. In addition to the potential challenges posed by asking participants to remember and articulate these past sensations in the present moment, the deeper inquiry may have been too much to ask of them. Indeed, this may have been the first opportunity for some to have truly reflected on their experiences volunteering in this regard. They had limited time to reflect and synthesize their thoughts prior to their interview, which, in turn may have reduced their ability to fully elaborate at the level of detail I had hoped.

Future studies may benefit from asking participants to keep a log of perceived changes as they are happening in the moment, interviewing participants during the actual act of them volunteering (if and as feasible), and/or interviewing them at multiple, separate times to allow for increased processing and reflection between interview sessions. In addition, utilizing additional measures to assess changes in wellbeing in combination with self-report (e.g., cortisol testing), may increase our ability of gathering information about more introspective questions that are sometimes difficult to capture by report.

Furthermore, by encouraging volunteers to journal throughout their engagement in service work, they may experience additional personal benefits, including increased opportunities for reflexive processing in which they can add language to what they're feeling—especially helpful when managing chaotic or high stress situations. Conducting a study that examines the inclusion of journaling as compared to the absence of journaling during service work may be a fruitful endeavor toward better discovering ways to improve volunteer outcomes. This avenue of research can also be extended to examine other potential means of improving

benefits and mitigating challenges experienced during service work within animal rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings, including, for example, an exploration of supervision and peer support practices.

Finally, a more explicit look is warranted into the potential mechanisms underlying the reciprocal benefits to human helpers and animal recipients of help within animal shelter/rescue/sanctuary settings. In particular, research into interspecies connections could focus on the specific physiological and psychological changes that occur over the course of a relationship between volunteer and rescue animal (e.g., in regard to limbic resonance and regulation).

Researcher Reflections

The completion of this dissertation was simultaneously an academic/professional endeavor and a deeply personal project. As I have a rich history of volunteerism within animal-centered organizations—which have been some of the most beneficially impactful experiences on my life thus far—I imagined that others engaging in this type of work may also have some positive perspectives to share on the reciprocal benefits of prosocial behaviors directed toward animals. Despite my largely positive views, however, I also understood intimately how challenging this work can be. While I walked into this study holding a complex perspective on this work and its impacts, I also recognized that this was only my story and may not reflect others' experiences. Consequently—and as stated previously—in order to (a) be aware of my biases as they arose; (b) determine the ways that these biases could impact my various roles as a researcher; and (c) better allow the volunteer-participants to share their own stories so that I could better capture the true essence of this phenomenon, I endeavored to engage in a continual process of self reflection throughout the duration of the study.

While I was not surprised by the vast majority of the things that were shared per se—positive, negative, or both—I did notice moments of continuity or discontinuity between each story, my own included. These moments felt authentic to each person and context, and offered me new perspectives on their experiences and views, as well as volunteering in this capacity more broadly. While I was interested in understanding the beneficial elements of prosocial behavior directed toward animals at the outset of this study, it became glaringly apparent that the challenges that people and animals face within this service work must also be discussed in order to better understand the overall phenomenon. Their cumulative tales of adversity alongside the plethora of beneficial gains they both gave and received, shined a light on the nuances of this work and allows us to consider more critically how to refine practices to reduce as able these more negative impacts. Consequently, it was critically important for me to allow space for participants holistic narratives—adjusting as necessary my language and reactions.

Additionally, of note, one of the most frequent experiences that I had personally throughout this study was a sense of awe in the individuals I was interviewing, and gratitude for being given the opportunity to learn from them. Their passion for animals and the betterment of the world at large was evident, and especially within the current social climate I felt so thankful to be witnessing their hard work, perseverance, compassion, and determination. The words of these five volunteers I had the privilege of speaking with have inspired me even more than I originally thought possible—it has provided me with further motivation to continue in this work (in its many forms) moving forward, both personally and professionally.

Concluding Remarks

The narratives of the five participant–volunteers interviewed for this study revealed

numerous reciprocal benefits to themselves and animals (psychologically, physiologically, and socially) through their service work in animal rescue, shelter, and sanctuary settings. Participants also realistically voiced challenges present in their work, including different points of stress. We as a field—and more broadly as a society—have an opportunity to utilize this information to (a) better support animal welfare initiatives; (b) make further steps toward accessing increased knowledge and understanding about prosociality and the human–animal bond; and (c) utilize our cumulative knowledge/understanding to make informed, ethical decisions within clinical practice that incorporates animal populations. Finally, and within the ecopsychological perspective that underpinned this study—it is imperative that we endeavor to think more compassionately, act more thoughtfully, and treat all others (humans, animals, and the earth on which our very survival depends) with the care and dignity they intrinsically deserve. We are all interconnected. As has been shown time and again: when we help others, we can also help ourselves.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Dear [X],

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Casey A. Culligan and I am a 5th year doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology program at Antioch University New England. I am conducting a study on how helping animals in need may affect both the animals and the volunteers who are attempting to help them. I am writing to ask you if you might be willing to pass along the attached flyer to known volunteers at animal shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries, which asks them if they are interested and willing to participate in this study?

Volunteers may be eligible to participate in this study if they are 18 years old or older and have volunteered at least eight hours a month for the past six months.

Participation is completely voluntary and all responses will be kept confidential.

You do not have to respond to this letter if you are not interested in this study. If you do not respond, you will not receive any further letters by me.

If you are interested in helping and think others would be interested in participating, please pass along the attached flyer to them.

Thank you for your time and consideration! If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me (██████).

I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Casey A. Culligan, M.S.
Psy.D Student
Antioch University New England

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Hello,

My name is Casey Culligan and I am a fifth year doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology Program at Antioch University New England. **I am conducting a research study to learn about how helping animals in need may affect both the animals and the volunteers who are working to help them.**

Are you...

- 18 years old or older?

- In a volunteer role at a non-kill animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary?

- Volunteering at least eight hours a month for the past six months?

If you answered yes to each of the above questions than you qualify for participation!

Your participation in this research would help us better understand how volunteers think about their volunteer experience. It would also help us understand if, how, and why volunteering at animal shelters/rescues/sanctuaries benefits both volunteers and the animals they're trying to help.

This study will involve about a five minute questionnaire and a one-hour interview (at a location convenient for you or over a phone/video-call) about your experiences volunteering.

Individuals who agree to participate in this study and are selected to engage in the interview section will receive a **\$20 Amazon gift card**. The interview will be **private** and all of your personal information and responses will be kept **confidential**.

Are you interested in participating? If so, please read and sign the informed consent form:



This document will give you more information about the nature and purpose of the study, including your rights as a participant and any potential risks and benefits you may receive through your participation.

Once you have electronically signed the informed consent form, you will then be redirected to fill out the brief, five minute online questionnaire. Following the completion of your questionnaire I will call and/or email you with the contact information that you will provide in your informed consent. We can then schedule your interview at a time that is convenient for you.

Thank you so much for your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at .

Sincerely,

Casey A. Culligan, M.S.

Appendix C: Description of Project and Informed Consent Letter

Study Title: Helping Animals, Helping Ourselves: Reciprocal Benefits of Prosocial Behaviors Directed Toward Animals

Principal Investigator: Casey A. Culligan, M.S. [REDACTED]

Sponsor: Antioch University New England

Introduction

This consent form aims to give you the information you need to understand why this research study is being done, and why you are being invited to participate. It also describes what you need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may encounter while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You may print this form to keep a copy for yourself.

Purpose and Background

If you are 18 years old or older, and have been participating in a volunteer position (by your own choice) within a non-kill animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary for at least eight hours a month for the past six months, you are invited to participate in this research study. This study is looking at how people think about their volunteer experience, and the ways in which they believe that they and the animals they serve are affected by their volunteer work.

What is Involved in the Study?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete one brief online questionnaire that will take about five minutes to complete, and a one-hour interview at a location convenient for you, over a secure video-call, or over the phone.

Risks

Participation in this study may involve minimal, if any, risks. If you have had a negative experience volunteering or interacting with animals in need it is possible that thinking about and answering questions related to your volunteer experience may cause emotional distress. It is important for you to know that you can stop or take a break at any point in our conversation. If need be, I can also provide information on obtaining counseling services upon request.

Benefits

While it cannot be guaranteed that you or any other participant will experience a personal benefit as a result of participating in this study, it is reasonable to believe that some benefits may occur. For example, you may benefit from reflecting on, and talking about, your experiences volunteering and serving animals in need. In addition, you could think about your involvement in this study as another way of giving, and you may feel good about that giving. The information you share in this study may help others, including other volunteers, animals, animal-welfare organizations, and the fields of clinical psychology, social psychology, and human–animal interaction, among others.

Confidentiality

Steps will be taken to keep information about you confidential. All interview answers will

remain confidential. Numerical codes will be assigned to each participant. These codes will be used on all research notes, audio files, and documents. A password will be required to access the electronic demographic questions and interview data for added protection. Only I will have access to this password. Any handwritten notes or interview transcriptions will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This cabinet will stay in the personal possession of the researcher. Audio files will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Direct quotes from the interviews will be used in the research and publication. However, quotes will be anonymous. The quotes will not include any information that might identify you.

Your Rights as a Research Participant

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all, or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to stop participating in this study will not result in any consequences or loss of benefits. It will not impact your volunteer work, or harm your relationship with your volunteer organization either.

Incentive

Individuals who participate in this study will be given a \$20 Amazon gift card. As noted above, this reward will be received even if you choose to drop out of the study during the interview.

Contact Information

Please contact [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns about this study. You can also contact [REDACTED] at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact [REDACTED], [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED], [REDACTED] at [REDACTED].

Documentation of Consent

Clicking on the “Yes” button below and entering my contact information will state that I have read this form and consent to participating in the study described above. Its general purposes, the details of participation and possible risks have been explained. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

[Yes/No Buttons]

Name _____

Today's Date _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

*You will be redirected to another page after clicking the “next” button to answer a few brief questions about yourself and your volunteering experiences. After you complete these questions I will contact you soon to set up your interview. Thank you again for your involvement in this study! [Next Button]

Appendix D: Consent for Audio and/or Video Recording

Clicking on the “Yes” button below will state that I give consent to be audio and/or video recorded during the interview section of the Helping Animals, Helping Ourselves research study.

As detailed in the Description of Project and Informed Consent Letter, several measures will be taken to keep audio/video recordings confidential, and to protect them from unauthorized damage, tampering, and disclosure. Numerical code names (ID numbers) will be assigned to each participant, and these numbers will be used on all research data and documents. Physical data/documents will be kept in a locked file cabinet. These cabinets will stay in the personal possession of the researcher. All electronic data/documents will be secured with a password protection that only the researcher, Ms. Casey Culligan, will have access to. Audio/video files of your interview will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

I understand I can withdraw my consent for audio and/or video recording at any time.

1. Name _____
2. Today’s Date _____
3. Documentation of Consent [Yes/No Buttons]

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age

2. Gender Identity
 - a. Genderqueer
 - b. Man
 - c. Trans*
 - d. Woman
 - e. Not listed (please specify) _____
3. Racial or Ethnic Identity (check all that apply)
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African-American
 - d. Hispanic or Latinx
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White or European
 - g. Not listed (please specify) _____
4. Highest Education Completed
 - a. Some middle or high school
 - b. High school diploma
 - c. Associate's degree
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Master's degree
 - f. Doctoral degree
5. Current employment status (check all that apply)
 - a. Unemployed
 - b. Part-time employment
 - c. Full time employment
 - d. Student
6. Self-identified socioeconomic status
 - a. Low
 - b. Middle
 - c. High
 - d. Not listed (please specify) _____
7. Do you currently volunteer at a non-kill animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary?
8. How many days per month do you typically volunteer at this animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary?

9. How many hours per month do you typically volunteer at this animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary?

10. How long (in months or years) have you been volunteering at this animal shelter, rescue, or sanctuary?

11. What are your roles/responsibilities as a volunteer at this site?

12. Is this the first location you have volunteered at to help animals in need?

- a. Yes
- b. No

13. If you answered “No” to question 12, please list the number of other sites you have volunteered at within the past/present to help vulnerable animals in need. Please include within this list the approximate duration of time you have volunteered at each site (range in months/years), and the approximate hours you spent per month volunteering.

Thank you again for your involvement in this study! I will be in touch with you shortly via the contact information you provided to schedule your brief interview at a time that is convenient.

Table 1. *Sample Display Table of Findings*

Clusters	Themes	Subthemes	Examples from Transcripts
Benefits Gained Through Service Work (N=5)	Awareness of one's own self-efficacy (N=5)	Witnessing one's positive impact on others (N=5)	<p>“She was this tiny little runt and we noticed that she was a little shy and skittish when we first got her. After a while she started warming up and everything. And then she just, you could see, when we come home [now] you can see the glow in her.” – Participant 1</p> <p>“You get them to use their commands as much as they can. Because the more that they know the more adoptable they sort of are. So sometimes you can see that start to set in. <i>So okay, when I get through the door I have to sit, and then I have to wait until the door opens, and then you say I can go. Then I have to sit and I have to wait until we can cross the street, and then I have to sit and wait before I can cross the street again.</i> So, then they start kind of learning a foundation of—this is good behavior and this is not good behavior—so it makes them a little more adoptable, as in they know what they should and shouldn't be doing. But it's not a punishment type of way, it's more of a like <i>Hey you're not doing the right thing but I'll bring you back and teach you how to do it so they can go, Ohhhhhhh, I know what I'm doing now.</i>” – Participant 2</p>

“Knowing that I made a change, I changed something. It’s not a big change it’s a little change... but that changed that animal’s life. There’s a saying out there and I’m going to misquote it I know it—[...] *you can’t change the life of everyone, but you can change the life of one*—and that’s what it is, it’s one change at a time. And that change of that one animal, and maybe the family it goes to, makes a change in that family, and maybe those kids grow up being more compassionate, maybe that family ends up being more compassionate. It can lead to so much, like the butterfly effect.”
– Participant 3

“You know, doing what I do... our organization has saved I’d say about a thousand animals a year. [...] So, we’ve been around for 10 years now, so we have definitely saved well over 10,000 animals. I have been part of that. I’m not as much into the part of pulling them from the shelter, and the organizational part of everything in coordinating all of that, but I know I’ve had an impact.”
– Participant 4

“I’m saving their lives. If I don’t agree to foster them they’re going to get put down.”
– Participant 5
