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EXPLORING THE LIVES OF ANIMAL ACTIVISTS:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to the faculty of  
Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

Erin K. McKenney

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0000-3248-2233

December 2023

EXPLORING THE LIVES OF ANIMAL ACTIVISTS:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

This dissertation, by Erin K. McKenney has  
been approved by the committee members signed below  
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of  
Antioch University New England  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **EXPLORING THE LIVES OF ANIMAL ACTIVISTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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The animal rights movement, despite its historical roots, has only recently garnered attention in the realm of social sciences, increasingly being recognized as a facet of social justice. This dissertation delves into the intersection of animal rights activism and gender, primarily focusing on the parallels drawn between the oppression of women and animals/nature. The noticeable dominance of women in the animal rights movement, as suggested by previous studies, formed the basis for adopting an eco-feminist approach to explore this issue, highlighting the shared oppression and exploitation faced by women and animals. In-depth, in-person interviews were used to collect data on the experiences of animal rights activists, probing how their interest was piqued, the nature of their participation, and the influence of their activism on their personal lives. This study also sought to explore potential gender-based differences in the experiences of activists. A constructionist research paradigm guided the qualitative inquiry, while a thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. The results showed a significant female representation, aligning with existing research, with only one participant identifying as male. Emerging themes revealed the formative influence of early childhood experiences in fostering an interest in animal welfare, such as familial influence or key events. Participants' involvement in animal activism manifested in various forms, such as volunteer work, fostering, lobbying, outreach, and education. Activism resulted both in benefits including social connectivity and

personal growth and challenges like burnout and compassion fatigue. These findings enrich the current understanding of the animal rights movement and its relationship to eco-feminism, intersectional environmentalism, and eco-psychology, adding further weight to its relevance in social justice discourse. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* animal activism, animal rights, eco-psychology, eco-feminism, intersectional environmentalism

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	xi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of Problem .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Research Questions .....	4
Definition of Terms.....	5
Groups Within the Movement .....	7
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
Introduction.....	9
Demographics .....	9
Development of an Animal Activist.....	10
Psychological Aspects of Animal Activism.....	11
Activism in Action.....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	13
Historical Roots of Ecofeminism.....	14
Abuse of Women and Animals.....	16
Animals and Marginalized Communities.....	17
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	20
Introduction.....	20
An Interpretivist/Constructionist Paradigm .....	20
Research Design.....	21



Participants.....	22
Ethical Considerations.....	23
Informed Consent.....	23
Confidentiality.....	23
Integrity and Quality of the Study.....	24
Interviews.....	27
Procedure.....	28
Data Analysis.....	29
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	33
Introduction.....	33
How People Develop Interest in Animal Welfare .....	33
Natural Love or Interest for Animals.....	33
Childhood Experiences and Family Attitudes.....	34
Conscious Lifestyle Choices.....	35
What Animal Activism Action Looks Like .....	36
Lifestyle/Diet.....	37
Volunteering.....	37
Giving to Local Shelters.....	37
Fostering Homeless Pets.....	38
Careers and Occupations.....	39
Networking and Spreading Awareness.....	40
The Use of Technology and Social Media.....	41
Effects of Animal Activism .....	43

Positive Effects.....	43
Social Connections .....	43
Physical Health Benefits.....	45
Personal Growth .....	45
Negative Effects.....	47
Lifestyle/Diet Restrictions .....	47
Burnout and Compassion Fatigue .....	49
Gendered Differences .....	51
Gendered Stereotype Experiences .....	51
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	54
Introduction.....	54
Summary of Findings and Interpretations.....	55
Developing an Interest in Animal Activism .....	55
Animal Activism in Action .....	56
Effects of Animal Activism .....	56
Gendered Observations .....	57
Limitations .....	60
Clinical Implications .....	61
Future Directions .....	62
Conclusion .....	64
References.....	65
APPENDIX A: EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM .....	72
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM .....	73

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	76
APPENDIX D: ANALYSIS TEMPLATE .....	77
APPENDIX E: TABLE WITH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.....	78

List of Tables

Table 1 Demographic Information..... 78

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In this qualitative study, I examined the lived experiences of animal activists and advocates. I explored how these individuals became interested and involved in the animal rights movement, how their involvement was reflected within their broader lives, and what impact and/or potential benefit it had on their lives emotionally, physically, and socially. Further, I considered the relationship between gender and animal-rights activism.

### **Background of Problem**

The animal rights movement has gained traction in the last several decades, beginning with Peter Singer's (1975) groundbreaking work, *Animal Liberation*, and further propelled by other publications, such as Tom Regan's (1983) *The Case for Animal Rights*. Although it is unclear how many animal activists there are (in part because there is no single definition of an "animal activist"), previous estimations suggest there are tens of thousands of animal activists worldwide, according to Speaking of Research (2018). Initially, the current movement grew largely in response to animal experimentation for research purposes; by the end of the 1980s, membership in animal advocacy organizations had reached ten million people in the United States in opposition to the use of animals in research (Lehman & Phelps, 2005). Presently, People of the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA; 2023) reports having over ten million members and supporters *worldwide*.

Despite the prominence of animal advocacy, it has also been the source of criticism. Critics contend that it takes away time and energy from other causes and that it trivializes human injustices (Kymlicka & Donaldson, 2014). However, as ecopsychologists have argued, humans, animals, and the environment are fundamentally interdependent, and consequently, all members of the earth need to be perceived and treated with honor and respect regardless of their social

locations (i.e., gender, sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, biology, taxonomy/species, class). Some even argue persuasively that human health and well-being is inextricably connected to the health of animals, and to communities, the environment, and the natural world at large (e.g., Fisher & Abram, 2002; Roszak, 2001). And as Jones (2015) suggests, animals are sentient beings (i.e., ability to experience pain, fear, and pleasure) and therefore, have moral status and should have moral entitlements; if they have entitlements, then they are subjects of justice. Thus, animal rights can be considered a social justice issue.

Moreover, through the frame of subjugation of oppressed groups, animal rights and human rights are clearly linked. Modern Western society is largely dominated by White male culture; individuals who do not fall into that classification are predisposed to certain disadvantages related to identity resulting in, for example, sexism, racism—and speciesism. Nibert (2002) argued that exploitation of nonhuman animals corresponds directly with oppression of women, as well as other marginalized groups at the benefit of a growing capitalist society. In a similar vein, Beirne (1999) also compares the exploitation of animals to oppression of both women and nature in terms of “green criminology” and crimes against nature.

It is reasonable to assume that most people care about animals and do not wish to see them mistreated, but what is not yet known are the factors that turn this compassion into action. What motivates people to action, to start a movement and advocate for a group which they themselves are not a member? Are they also involved in other social justice advocacy on behalf of humans and/or the non-human natural world? Notably, too, most animal activists are women. What are the factors that lead more women than men to embrace the fight for animal rights? How can we best understand women’s relatively greater investment in this cause? Given the

public perception and stereotypes of animal rights activists, it is worth examining the lived experiences of individuals involved in the movement.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As the animal rights movement has gained momentum in the past several decades, it has generated some interest from the social sciences. Preliminary studies have examined the demographic makeup of participants in the animal rights movement. However, studies exploring the lived experiences of these individuals—conducted primarily in the United States—are scarce and most are over a decade old. Animal activists are often depicted negatively, portrayed as overly emotional, “rigid,” and “unyielding” fanatics (Einwohner, 1999; Gaarder, 2008; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). Although many people worldwide devote time and energy to animal-related causes, it has not been the focus of extensive research. To garner serious attention and legitimacy for animal activism as a social justice issue, more research is needed. Little is known about activists’ lived experiences: how activists become involved in the cause, the justifications for their actions, and how they understand the impact activism has on their lives and the lives of the non-human animals they are defending.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study explored the experiences of animal activists who are involved in animal rights activism, focusing specifically on how their involvement in the movement developed, what their involvement entailed, what kind of impact—both socially and emotionally—activism had on their lives, and whether they perceived gender identity as a factor in their involvement or experiences. I also sought to find out more about the well-documented—but poorly-understood—association between female gender identity and animal activism.

## Research Questions

Living the life of an animal activist is a multifaceted journey filled with various experiences and emotions. For many, their interest in the movement often begins with a transformative moment or experience that sparked their passion for animal rights. Their involvement in this movement tends to be diverse, ranging from advocacy and lobbying to direct action and education.

Each activist carries their unique reasons or justifications for their actions, often rooted in empathy for animals, a belief in justice, or even personal experiences with animals. The movement, invariably, has a profound influence on their lives. Perceived benefits vary among individuals but commonly encompass social, emotional, psychological, and physical aspects. Activists often find a sense of community and purpose, emotional satisfaction from aiding in alleviating animal suffering, psychological fulfillment from aligning their actions with their beliefs, and occasionally, physical benefits from adopting lifestyle choices such as veganism or vegetarianism.

However, the path of an activist is not without its risks or stressors. Social alienation, emotional turmoil from witnessing animal suffering, psychological stress from societal pushback, and sometimes physical risks associated with activism can occur. Gender's role in activism is a fascinating dimension to explore; it potentially impacts how individuals engage with the movement and how they are perceived by society.

As such, my research questions focused on:

- Life as an animal activist
  - How did their interest in the movement begin?
  - What has their involvement in this movement entailed?



- What are the reasons or justifications for their actions?
- What kind of impact or influence has this movement had on their lives?
  - Perceived benefits? (Social, emotional, psychological, physical)
  - Perceived risks or stressors? (Social, emotional, psychological)
- To what extent has gender played a role in activism?

Moreover, participants were given the freedom to formulate their own questions (and answers) that they considered pertinent to the broader project, fostering a more personalized and in-depth understanding of their involvement in animal activism.

### **Definition of Terms**

Several terms and concepts must be clarified for this purpose of this project, specifically how the animal rights movement is defined, and the terms used to describe different types of groups and/or activity within the movement. Because there are varying levels of animal activism, there is no clear consensus of what the actual goals of animal-advocacy groups are. Engagement can range from advocating for more humane treatment or welfare to awarding animals rights on the grounds of moral or legal status. A clarification of the terms is presented below.

#### **Animal Rights vs. Animal Welfare**

Waldau (2010) posits that the term “animal rights” can possess a dual interpretation. On one hand, it can imply “moral rights for animals,” reflecting a broader ethical perspective towards animal welfare. Conversely, it can also denote a more exact, law-related protection, commonly referred to as “legal rights” (p. 4). Lehman and Phelps (2005) define “animal rights” as the safeguarding of animals from inhumane treatment. These legal protections explicitly forbid certain types of harsh and pitiless treatment of animals in the context of medical and

scientific research, as well as during the handling and slaughter of animals intended for human consumption.

Waldau (2010) goes on to say how the phrase “animal rights” is a generic term for the worldwide social movement that is also known as “the animal protection movement.” In this sense, the concept of “welfare” or humane treatment is identified.

Expanding on his thoughts, Waldau (2010) elaborates on the term “animal rights,” characterizing it as a universal descriptor for a global social crusade that advocates for the well-being of animals. This movement, alternatively termed as “the animal protection movement,” is not confined by geographical borders or cultural divides. It serves as a unifying call to action for individuals and organizations from all corners of the globe who share a common purpose—the protection of animal welfare.

However, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA; 2023) make the distinction between “rights” and “welfare:”

Animal welfare theories accept that animals have interests but allow these interests to be traded away as long as there are some human benefits that are thought to justify that sacrifice. Animal rights means that animals, like humans, have interests that cannot be sacrificed or traded away just because it might benefit others. Animal rights means that animals are not ours to use for food, clothing, entertainment, or experimentation. Animal welfare allows these uses as long as “humane” guidelines are followed.

This large movement represents an amalgamation of diverse ideologies, strategies, and goals unified under the overarching concept of animal rights. It encompasses various approaches to animal advocacy—from legal strategies aimed at strengthening animal protection laws, to

educational campaigns for raising public awareness about animal welfare issues, and even direct-action protests against institutions involved in animal exploitation.

Despite this diversity, all factions within this movement fundamentally agree on the need for a systemic shift in how society views and treats animals. In essence, the animal rights and welfare movements are embodiments of the collective struggle against animal cruelty and exploitation, seeking to instill respect and compassion for all animals.

### **Groups Within the Movement**

Jasper and Nelkin (1992) further unpack the animal protection movement, identifying, for instance, welfare groups such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Typically, welfare groups are concerned with reducing unnecessary pain and suffering for animals, but still accept the use of animals for scientific pursuits. Some groups that are more pragmatic or utilitarian seek to liberate animals, such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). This section of the movement has achieved the most progress through legislation (for example, advocating alternatives to testing on animals and supporting the passage of regulations for the treatment of farm animals). Lastly, fundamentalist groups such as Animal Liberation Front (ALF) have been known to employ non-violent civil disobedience as well as extreme tactics that may involve intimidation and violence to fight for animal rights. These tactics can range from vandalism or breaking into research laboratories (which can be considered forms of eco-terrorism) to less-extreme tactics such as protests and rallies. These fundamentalist groups argue that animals should not be exploited for human purposes in any way, not even for companionship.

Clearly, there is overlap among the groups as they all have concern for the treatment of animals, but the goals of these sub-groups differ in terms of their beliefs about the moral and

legal standing of animals, especially in comparison to their human counterparts. Animal rights groups can involve themselves in animal welfare issues, such as eliminating the use of gestation crates in factory farming, even though they may not agree with the use of animals for consumption.

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term “animal activists” or “animal advocates” encompasses individuals who are involved in both animal welfare and animal rights movements, reflecting the interconnectedness and sometimes blurry lines between these groups. Accordingly, an animal activist will meet the following criteria: self-identification as an activist for animals, complemented by tangible evidence of participation or involvement in the cause.

This requirement transcends mere passive actions, such as a person contributing spare change to a local shelter’s donation box. Rather, to qualify as an animal activist, an individual must exhibit commitment and action that exceed the usual efforts of someone who simply cares about animals. This could manifest in various forms, such as adopting a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, refusing to use products tested on animals, volunteering at animal shelters or organizations, getting involved in legislative issues, or participating in other activities that actively challenge and seek to improve the treatment of animals.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The mistreatment of animals is not just an isolated issue, but one that is deeply intertwined with other societal problems, such as violence against women and injustices faced by marginalized communities. A literature review revealed findings related to animal rights activists including demographic and developmental information, and the impact this movement has had on activists' attitudes, emotions, and relationships. Recent research provides a powerful argument for the connections between animal rights, feminism, and environmentalism.

### Demographics

The most striking demographic of animal activists is that they are primarily women (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993; Herzog & Galvin, 1998; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Plous, 1991; Shapiro, 1994). A sample from research in the 1990's yielded a majority of White, educated urban female professionals, average age of 30 years old and who identified as Democrats or Independents, with moderate to liberal views (Jamison & Lunch, 1992). Another study looked at changes in demographics of animal rights activists between the 1990 March for Animals in D.C. and one held in 1996; results indicated that most animal activists continued to be female and the median age to be slightly higher at 32 years old (Herzog & Galvin, 1998). Yet another study during that time found a sample predominantly made up of women who had at least a college education and reported spending up to 30 hours per week on animal related movement activities (Shapiro, 1994). In contrast, a later study (Jerolmack, 2003) found data that did not support the stereotype; these results indicated that young, non-black minorities, including less educated were also likely to support animal rights. In this particular study (Jerolmack, 2003), income was not a significant predictor of supporting animal rights however, religious denomination, frequency of

church attendance, and attitudes toward environmental protection associated with animal welfare/rights support.

### **Development of an Animal Activist**

The process of becoming an animal activist has a variety of contributing factors including biological and environmental influences. Arluke (2003) concluded that “super-nurturance” begins in childhood and is something that can be modeled and taught. Families who validated the importance of pets, modeled nurturing behaviors, identified as “animal people,” viewed animals as helpers, and assumed responsible caretaking of pets were found to have children who also demonstrated an unusually strong concern for animals. In a related study of adult animal activists, Pallotta (2008) found that participants first recognized their concern for animals by fourteen years of age or younger, and reported early signs of activism including, for example, ‘meat resistance,’ rescuing animals, and a heightened sensitivity to animal suffering.

It is not unusual for animal activists to pursue veganism in their commitment to do no harm to animals (Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014; Herzog & Golden, 2009; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002; McDonald, 2000; Pallotta, 2008; Plous, 1998). For example, McDonald (2000) conducted a qualitative study of the process of becoming vegan and identified themes of catalytic or shocking events and a repression of information (i.e., ignoring or denying) before developing a desire to learn, deciding to adopt veganism, and acquiring a vegan worldview.

In a similar vein, Pallotta (2005) explored the phenomenon through a qualitative, participant-observer study which revealed complex dynamics regarding the socialization and re-socialization of activists within a society that holds opposing ideas about the treatment of animals (i.e., keeping some as companions while slaughtering and eating others). Hansson and Jacobsson (2014) further argue that becoming an animal activist is more than just identity change

and re-socialization but also requires a “re-engineering” of affective and cognitive processes; that is, activists develop unique mental responsiveness and awareness to animal suffering which includes a refined capacity for sensing. In this regard, animal activists have reported major shifts in thinking and worldviews, which often dominate much of their daily activities. Activists are often confronted with moral ambiguities (for example, how to manage pests such as mice or insects) and strive to live a lifestyle which is consistent with their moral values (which aims to reduce animal suffering); this has been likened to a religious conversion (Herzog, 1993; Jamison et al., 2000).

### **Psychological Aspects of Animal Activism**

A closer look at animal activists reveals that their primary concern is caring about animals. As such, they are primed to see suffering in animals and actively seek out and investigate situations in which animals may be suffering (Shapiro, 1994). Gaarder (2008) goes on to say, “once activists learn about the seemingly endless examples of animal suffering, it is hard to tune out or turn off” (p. 8). Activists have reported that their strong positions have taken tolls on their relationships and careers in addition to affecting their emotional wellbeing (Gaarder, 2008). Immersing oneself in the world of animal rights involves exposure to the idea of animal suffering, which can be emotionally exhausting. The psychological stress results in various ways: embracing pain and suffering, suppression of feelings, or losing touch with the caring side (i.e., compassion fatigue; Shapiro, 1994). Animal activists have reported socializing with other like-minded people as a source of support to counter the potential impacts of burnout, stress, and emotional exhaustion attendant to the work (Gaarder, 2008).

There appear to be psychological benefits to animal activism as well. One study found that, despite experiencing stressors, activists also report higher levels of awareness about

political issues, greater self-confidence, feelings of making a difference, and viewing their lives as more meaningful (Gaarder, 2008). These findings align with the theory that activism generates a sense of “global citizenship” (Reysen & Hackett, 2017). In a related exploration of well-being, Klar and Kasser (2009) concluded that activism in the forms of helping or volunteering is related to hedonic, eudemonic, and social wellbeing, further suggesting that helping or altruistic behaviors are linked to feelings of overall life satisfaction.

### **Activism in Action**

As it is part of their identities, activism is believed to impact animal activists’ emotions and attitudes, which in turn, impact decisions and behaviors. Vegetarianism or veganism is a common way of internalizing one’s values. For example, Herzog and Golden (2009) found that animal activists are more sensitive to visceral disgust—which is identified as a “moral” emotion—than non-animal activists and that disgust sensitivity correlated positively with attitudes toward the welfare of animals. However, disgust sensitivity did not correlate to meat consumption and, surprisingly, half of the activists surveyed ate meat. This study suggests that animal activists have a complicated relationship between animal activism and vegetarianism/veganism.

Animal rights activists often make significant lifestyle changes to achieve moral consistency (Herzog, 1993) and this is often reflected in dietary preferences. It can be considered such a defining feature that some studies about animal activism studies used veganism as a condition or selection criterion for participants (Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014; Pallotta, 2008). Different studies have found that nearly half of animal activists are vegetarian (Herzog & Golden, 2009; Plous, 1991) and 18% are vegan (Plous, 1991). A more recent Gallup poll found 5% of American adults reported a vegetarian lifestyle (Hrynowski, 2019), although this number



may be higher. In addition to dietary choices, animal activists make other lifestyle changes. For instance, Gaarder (2008) interviewed a sample of animal activists and found that many tend to prefer natural, homeopathic medicine to avoid pharmaceuticals which test on animals; consumer behavior is also influenced by the preference for cruelty-free products.

Animal activists rely on different courses of action; some are subtler, personal behaviors such as consumption, other individuals participate in marches or rallies, while others engage in animal rescue. One study interviewed activists and found they believed peaceful demonstrations were acceptable to pursue the goals of the movement; some respondents admitted that dramatic forms of civil disobedience such as “liberating” laboratory animals were sometimes necessary (Herzog, 1993). Several participants in Gaarder’s (2008) study described their involvement with law enforcement because of more extreme and fundamental forms of activism. Groups such as the Animal Liberation Front intentionally behave outside of the law; this level of advocacy is less common but can color public perception of animal rights activists (Gaarder, 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The predominance of female-identifying individuals in this movement may be a result of a mutual oppression of women, animals, and nature. Because the animal rights movement is predominantly comprised of female-identifying participants (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993; Herzog & Galvin, 1998; Jamison & Lurch, 1992; Plous, 1991; Shapiro, 1994), some argue that animal advocacy be regarded as a “women’s movement” (Deckha, 2013), with feminism and intersectionality as central concerns. Thus, ecofeminism is an appropriate lens with which to view the movement and its members. Ecofeminism is a feminist approach to ecology and environmentalism, assuming the concurrent oppression of both women and nature (Goard & Gruen, 1993).

The term “ecofeminism” was first coined in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne and has become increasingly mainstream since the early 1970s. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. (Miles, 2018, para. 1)

Ecofeminists believe the oppression of women and the natural earth are interconnected and rooted in a deep patriarchal structure. Donovan (1990) goes on to say that “domination of nature, rooted in post medieval, Western, male psychology is the underlying cause of mistreatment of animals as well as the exploitation of women and the environment” (p. 375).

Consistent with this notion, some studies have shown that women tend to hold more pro-environmental attitudes than men do (Blocker & Eckbert 1997; Dietz et al., 2002; McCright & Xiao, 2014; Milfont & Sibley, 2016). Ecofeminism suggests that masculine, patriarchal ways of thinking are responsible for not only the oppression of women but also the exploitation of the environment, and specifically, the exploitation of nonhuman animals.

### **Historical Roots of Ecofeminism**

Accounts of interlinked oppression between women and nature are recorded throughout history going back to Biblical times. For example, reflected in the English Standard Version Bible (2009, Genesis 1:26,28),

*God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.*

This concept of biblical patriarchy is also seen in the story of Adam and Eve, in which the woman (Eve) is considered subordinate to the man (Adam). Here, Adam was given dominion over animals and nature before the creation of Eve. These gender roles are based on traditional religious scripture but have persisted through the ages, further reinforcing the dominant role of men and a patriarchal society.

Sultana (2012) argues that patriarchy is the “prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development,” and references various origins of patriarchy along with religious tradition. She goes on to say how women’s subordination began with the development of private property, where the ownership of private property equaled power and prestige within growing colonialism (and eventually capitalism). In Western society, both women and animals were once viewed as kinds of property of men. While tradition in England denied women legal, political, and economic rights, this discrimination against married women continued into colonial United States (Zaher, 2002) through coverture. Through this legal binding, women become “property” of their husbands for all intents and purposes and stripped of rights and society moved toward liberation of women. St. Pierre (1998) states,

Classifying beings as property is a powerful tool of oppression used to quell animal rights today. However, just as slaves and married women were able to overcome insurmountable odds and achieve freedom from the property status, non-human animals stand today at that brink, awaiting liberation. (p. 271)

In England in the 1890s and early 1900s, several female medical students initiated the anti-vivisection movement and opposed the use of animals for medical training purposes and likened themselves with the plight of animals. Feminists clashed with medical students; this often resulted in the jailing of suffragettes. Lansbury (1985) describes how these women were

brutally force-fed during attempted hunger strikes, an oppressive response that further prompted their identification with the animals which were so frequently used to train medical students. The suffragettes found themselves aligned with members of the labor union as well as other feminists and other animal advocates. This clash eventually led to riots in London, including the “Brown Dog Riots” (Lasbury, 1985). At this point, “workers and animals sharing the same fate” (Lansbury, 1985, p. 82). Following these riots, a paper titled “Women and Socialism” was published by a suffragette named Isabella Ford (1904) to argue for women’s rights and labor movements: Kean (1995) later used this document to describe how the effects of industrialization impacted nature and drew a parallel between the treatment of women and animals: “In order to obtain a race of docile, brainless creatures, whose flesh and skins we can use with impunity, we have for ages past exterminated all those who showed signs of too much insubordination and independence of mind” (p. 29).

### **Abuse of Women and Animals**

The interconnection of mistreatment of women and animals continues in today’s modern society. There is a clearly established link between animal abuse and other forms of violence, specifically intimate partner violence (Arluke et al., 1999; Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Febres et al., 2014). A robust body of data highlights the intersection of violence against women and animals, typically at the hands of male perpetrators (Febres et al., 2014).

Even taking into consideration the sanctioned “legal” mistreatment of animals, studies have found a correlation between the presence of slaughterhouses and an increase in violent crime—notably rape—in the surrounding communities (Fitzgerald et al., 2009; Jacques, 2014). Though this type of employment cannot be considered a cause of violent crime, the connection cannot be understated. For this reason, animal abuse and animal rights have also captured the

attention of criminologists (Beirne, 1999), including “green criminologists” who study crimes against the environment, including violence against animals.

### **Animals and Marginalized Communities**

Abuse of animals is also associated with violence against other marginalized communities. This broader lens has been termed *environmental racism* (Chavis, 1994):

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking and enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presence of life-threatening poisons and pollutants for communities of color, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement. (p. xi)

In rural America for example, members of low-income and minority communities experience the negative impacts of nearby industrial hog farms and confined agricultural feeding operations (CAFOs), as these individuals are constantly exposed to toxic waste, pollution, and other environmental hazards (Nicole, 2013; Pellow, 2016; Son & Bell, 2022; Son et al., 2021). As members in these rural, low-income BIPOC communities are exposed to water and air pollution, the animals raised in industrial factory farms are also relegated to lives of confinement and mistreatment.

The exploitation seen in modern industrial practices has deep roots in Colonialism and US history. Members of marginalized communities have historically experienced oppression as the lands they live upon and the animals they coexist with have all been exploited. Krásná (2022) writes:

By tracing the history of displacement of Indigenous populations due to animal agriculture, animal colonialism is also linked to mass killing of free-living animals and to

environmental degradation. Furthermore, ... the entangled oppression of Indigenous women's and nonhuman animals' bodies that can be theorized as colonized territories, exploited for profit via the control of their reproductive cycles. (p. 61)

Today's ecofeminists are aware of the historical roots of oppression. One exemplar is Patrice Jones, who runs a LGBTQ- led animal-rescue organization in Vermont. She is an eco-feminist and a leader in the animal rights activism movement. She has drawn attention to the intersections of oppression, including animals, the environment, and marginalized communities. In a December 2014 talk, she shared,

More recently, finally, we have started to think about environmental racism and environmental justice and how all of these intersecting forms of oppression among homo sapiens both lead to and are worsened by the despoliation of the environment ... So speciesism is inextricably bound up with these other, so-called other forms of oppression. Every single thing that is done to an animal or an animal's habitat is done, and even if it is done by people, it's done by people! People in particular social contexts—social contexts that include racism, and sexism, and homophobia, and transphobia, and etc. People who are living in economic circumstances which are shaped by those social forces. People living in physical places that have been and continue to be shaped by these forces. And so if we think we can liberate animals without reference to these things, you know that's just not sensible thinking. (Earthling Liberation Kollektive, 2014, 9:15)

In sum, the mistreatment and exploitation of animals has been documented throughout history, not coincidentally along with the oppression of human minority groups and environmental degradation. Thus, while this research project explores animal rights activism, it

is important to note that any focus on the protection and well-being of non-human animals is an integral element of the broader struggle for social and environmental justice.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This section outlines the methodology of this study. A qualitative study approach and its rationale is presented, followed by a description of the research design, including participants, integrity and quality, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Researcher biases and assumptions are also noted. Research questions, interviews and settings are discussed along with strategies for data collection and analysis.

### **An Interpretivist/Constructionist Paradigm**

A paradigm is described as “a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world,’ the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). An interpretivist/constructionist paradigm was used to frame this study as it seeks to explore the human experience from the participants’ perspectives. Interpretivists/constructionists assume that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). These types of researchers “share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 221). Research in this paradigm often does not begin with a theory, as it is preferred that a pattern of meaning will emerge through themes in the data (Collins & Stockton, 2018), that is, a more “top-down” approach.

A constructivist paradigm is based on the idea that there is no one truth or reality; thus, reality is intersubjective in nature. Because of this, meanings and understandings about how the world operates are created socially (Kim, 2001) and based on the social environment. Animal activists are unique individuals each with their subjective experiences of the world and as such,



their idiosyncratic and personal meaning-making cannot be measured objectively through traditional positivist approaches.

From an epistemological standpoint, the interpretivist/constructionist seeks to interpret reality to discover underlying themes and meanings. It is assumed that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know; how we understand ourselves is linked to how we understand others and the world, including that which is being studied. Because of this, the researcher's values are embedded throughout the entire research process and should be acknowledged.

Methodologically, naturalistic methods are typically employed within this paradigm. For this study, interviews as well as observation and an analysis of existing literature were used. Because reality is socially and collaboratively constructed, it is important for the researcher and participants to be able to negotiate this through ongoing meaningful dialogue. Meanings are believed to emerge through this dialogue and the research process. To this end, I conducted interviews with activists and used a thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative design was selected for this study, as it seeks to focus on the lived experiences and the meanings of these experiences to the participants which are subjective in nature. Qualitative research is defined as

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p. 14)

This study focuses on the subjective experiences of its participants (specifically their unique thoughts, feelings, and reflections on their involvement with animal activism) and potential themes running through the responses.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of eight self-identified animal activists over the age of 18. Criteria for participant selection was as follows: (a) individuals must self-report as an animal activist and (b) have demonstrable evidence of participation in actions which help animals.

Purposive/intensity sampling and snowball sampling methods were used.

I had planned to interview four female-identifying participants and four male-identifying participants but ultimately included seven cisgendered females and one cisgendered male in the study. Participants all lived in the New England area and spent up to one to one and a half hours in their individual interviews. Participation was completely voluntary; participants had the right to withdraw at any time. They were compensated with \$20 for their time or could select a \$20 donation to a charitable organization of their choice. On the day of the interviews, I reviewed the study with the participants, obtained written informed consent (see Appendix B), and provided an opportunity to answer any questions.

I used purposive/intensity and snowball sampling to obtain eight participants from the online social media “Facebook groups” which centered on various animal welfare causes and organizations including Green Mountain Animal Defenders, the VINE Sanctuary, and other New England-based groups. I solicited participation by posting a description of the study and my contact information. Additionally, I asked permission from online moderators and administrators when appropriate. I also recruited participants through snowball sampling, asking participants to recommend others in their activist networks, specifically males.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Operating from a constructionist paradigm, ethics are “intrinsic ... because of the inclusion of participant values in the inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 215). Conducting research in an ethical manner is a significant responsibility of the researcher during every phase of the project. This section will describe ethical considerations regarding this research and steps taken to ensure the safety and privacy of the participants. This includes identifying potential risks and benefits, informed consent, confidentiality, trustworthiness, credibility and researcher assumptions and biases. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### ***Informed Consent***

Participants were fully informed about the voluntary nature of this study, the purpose, methods, and intended uses of the research and what their participation would entail. Participants were informed of risks and benefits; possible risks were not anticipated to be more than encountered in day-to-day life and were considered low. I ensured that participants were fully informed of the purpose, methods, and uses of this study by reviewing the consent form (Appendix B) with the participants and obtaining a written signature. A copy of the written consent form was given to each participant and a copy was stored with participants’ data in a secured fashion.

### ***Confidentiality***

Respecting participants’ personal information is central to ethical research. The best way to safeguard against invasion of privacy is to assure confidentiality of participants and to be aware that safeguards are not always “airtight” (Punch, 1994). Because of this, extra precaution is necessary to prevent any possible breaches of confidentiality. In the first phase of participant

recruitment, interested parties submitted a letter of interest electronically to this researcher, supplying basic information (see Appendix A). These letters of interest were saved in a password protected file on the researcher's password-protected computer. For the participants who had been selected to be interviewed, they were assigned a numeric code as "Participant 1, Participant 2," and so on. This numeric code was used to identify any information and data collected, including information obtained on the original letter of interest form. All participant information was audio-taped as the interviews were conducted, along with written information jotted down on protocol forms (Appendix C and D) during the interviews. After each interview was completed, I transcribed the information into documents, redacting any personal participant information and storing raw data in a password-protected USB drive and an encrypted file on my password-protected computer. The computer and USB drive contained individual files for each participant, including the transcriptions, expression of interest forms, and consent forms. Once the audio recordings were transcribed and stored, the audio recordings were deleted.

### ***Integrity and Quality of the Study***

Specific criteria determine the accuracy or believability of qualitative inquiry. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is likened to validity and reliability in quantitative studies; the criteria used by constructivist researchers to judge trustworthiness of a study are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2015).

**Credibility.** Like the role of internal validity in quantitative research, credibility plays an important role in this type of research. Mertens (2015) uses this term to refer to the accuracy of the findings of the study; this signals to the readers that the results are believable. Credibility in this exploration was established in several ways. First, through time: I engaged with participants

for as long as was necessary to learn about the phenomenon of interest. I interviewed participants until saturation was reached; that is, we continued a conversation until certain themes began to reappear in participants' narratives. This apparent repetition of themes within the interviews signaled that adequate and quality data was collected in order to support the study. Second, I conducted member checks. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). To this end, I solicited feedback from participants to be sure they were satisfied that I was clear about the accuracy of statements. Third, peer debriefing was used as an external check of process and to further evaluate my thematic interpretations. Peer debriefing is defined as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). To further ensure credibility, I consulted with colleagues to review my work.

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the degree to which findings are applicable in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reader is ultimately responsible for determining if the findings of a study can be compared to other situations with which they are familiar. If the specifics are comparable, then this research would be considered more believable. Providing the reader with "thick descriptions" of the methodology as well as of the findings is a method of ensuring transferability; the more highly detailed accounts of the study, the more likely readers might be prompted to think of other similar situations.

**Dependability.** Although qualitative research is subjective in nature and not easily replicated, the idea of dependability is akin to reliability in quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1994) note that a dependable study needs to be "accurate and consistent." Again,

providing highly detailed accounts of every step in the study can help other researchers repeat the inquiry and achieve similar results. Another technique included to ensure dependability is an external audit inquiry, which is a process in which a researcher not involved in the study examines both the process and product of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as an impartial “third party.” To ensure dependability, I provided “rich descriptions” of the study methods and materials and established an “audit trail” that I followed the protocol that had been agreed upon by my committee and me, in the case this study was to be replicated.

**Confirmability.** Paralleling objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), confirmability asks how the findings are supported by the data collected. In other words, confirmability is the extent to which the findings are shaped by the respondents and not the researcher’s bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance confirmability, an audit trail was completed throughout the study to demonstrate how each decision was made, using raw data, process notes, and other materials throughout the study. Reflexivity is another way to strengthen the confirmability of the study. Malterud (2001) states that “A researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (pp. 483–484). Because of this, the reflexivity, or the attitude the researcher takes to attend to their own subjectivity, biases, and perceptions is critical and something I maintained awareness of as this study’s researcher.

**Researcher Biases and Assumptions.** I acknowledge my membership in the group which I am studying. I endeavored to be conscientious about my personal biases, opinions, and values, making every effort not to influence the informant’s narratives, information, or experiences. As described above, I implemented steps to mitigate potential biases. I assumed

participants were honest during their interviews and that the information they reported was an accurate reflection of their experiences. It can also be noted that a potential inherent power differential can exist between the researcher and the participants; I sought to address this by maintaining awareness of the relationship between myself and the participants, and continuing with a warm, open, and person-centered approach.

### **Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews one-on-one with the participants. The length of the interview ranged from one hour to one-and-a-half hours. The interviews were all conducted in person, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by me. The following main questions guided the interview structure and were developed by me:

1. How did you first become involved in the animal rights movement?
  - a. At what age did you first become aware or interested in the treatment of animals?
  - b. Describe any events or experiences that prompted your interest.
2. Describe your involvement in the movement. What kinds of activities or actions do you participate in?
  - a. What are your reasons or justifications for these actions?
3. What kind of impact or effect has your involvement had on your life? How is your life different because of your activism?
  - a. Describe any benefits that your involvement may have had on you (psychologically, socially, emotionally, or physically)?
  - b. Describe any challenges or risks that your involvement may have had on you (psychologically, socially, emotionally, or physically)?

4. Do you believe gender plays a role in your involvement? Explain.
5. Are there any other questions (and answers) that you feel are important or relevant to your work in this movement?

(See Appendix C for the interview protocol.) I began interviews by soliciting demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity, geographical location, pet ownership, and highest educational level completed.

I negotiated and determined the location for interviews with individual participants. The study spanned the New England area and interviews took place in participants' homes or other quiet, semi-public locations, such as parks, coffee shops or libraries in their immediate vicinity. I traveled to the participants' geographical locations (with permission) for convenience purposes.

### **Procedure**

Once IRB permission was granted, I contacted administrators of online animal-rights support groups for permission to post online about recruitment of informants along with an Expression of Interest form (Appendix A). Curious participants sent Expression of Interest forms to me with their email information. I then wrote them a follow-up email and we arranged a time and place to meet. At that time, I obtained written consent (Consent Form found in Appendix B), established rapport, and gathered demographic information. Next, I began the semi-structured interview, adding clarifying and deepening follow-up questions.

All participant information was audio-taped as the interviews were conducted along with written information jotted down on protocol forms (Appendix C and D) during the interviews to help me organize and keep track of incoming data. After each interview was completed, I transcribed the information into documents, which were redacted of any personal participant information, stored on a password-protected USB drive, and protected hard drive file. These



drives contained individual files for each participant, including the transcriptions, expression of interest forms, and consent forms. Once the audio recordings had been transcribed and stored, the audio recordings were deleted. As participants were interviewed, I tracked emerging themes and continued to interview until data saturation was achieved. When data elicited from informants became repetitive and redundant, it was apparent that the amount of data collected was sufficient.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a thematic analysis for this study, which is a qualitative research method described by Braun and Clarke (2012) as “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns (themes) across a data set” (p. 57). They go on further to explain how this method “allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences ... is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and making sense of its commonalities.” For the purposes of this study, the “data set” refers to the collection of interviews I recorded and transcribed, while a “data item” refers to an individual interview and/or a specific portion or chunk.

**Thematic Analysis.** I selected thematic analysis for this study because is aligned with my research questions; it was appropriate for the breadth and depth of this study as well as my own scope of competence as a researcher. Braun and Clarke (2006) speak to the accessibility and flexibility of Thematic Analysis; they argue that thematic analysis should be a foundational method and the first method that researchers should learn. Additionally, it can be used within a variety of frameworks as it is not theoretically bound. However, because of the flexibility and accessibility of this type of analysis, Braun and Clark emphasize the importance of “clarity on process and practice of method.” In this regard, the process does not reflect a passive stance of

“emerging themes,” but rather, acknowledges the researcher who brings in their own ideas, experiences, and attitudes.

To further clarify the process and practice, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) explain the importance of the researcher’s *choices* when conducting thematic analysis, specifically in terms of *type* of thematic analysis, as well as how the researcher *orients themselves to the data* and lastly, the *perspective or framework* of the researcher. Additionally, it is important for the researcher to be transparent and report these choices.

For this study, I chose a *theoretical* or *deductive* type of thematic analysis, which is theory-drive (rather than data-driven), meaning I coded for research questions, as I had already conducted a literature review and was aware of themes that previous research had identified. In this way, I brought with me my ideas and concepts to the process of analysis. Following this process, I used *critical orientation* when coding my data, as I attended to the *semantic* or surface-level themes, as opposed to viewing latent themes for further interpretation. In this sense, I identified themes within the data sets but reported them without much exploration beyond the primary extrapolation of patterns. Lastly, I used a *constructionist* perspective, which has been described previously in this section. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this perspective “seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts that are provided” (p. 85). They further elaborate that deductive thematic analysis is often critical in its orientation and constructionist in its theoretical framework, as it “examines how the world is put together (i.e., constructed) and the ideas and assumptions that inform data are gathered” (p. 59). Thus, these choices are appropriate within this analysis for this type of study.

To further explain and clarify the process and method of thematic analysis, I will break down the six-step structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). I used a qualitative software program MAXQDA to save, analyze and interpret my data. MAXQDA is a popular option for analyzing qualitative data and especially using MAXQDA with the six-step process (Uştuk, 2022).

1. *Familiarize yourself with the data:* Since I collected the data through recording interviews with participants, I was already familiar with the data. I used the MAXQDA software to transcribe each interview into electronic files that I could read, re-read, and make notes.
2. *Generate initial codes:* As I was using a deductive, theory-driven approach, I scanned the data for relevant or interesting codes related to my research questions. I highlighted and color-coded the initial codes and created broad possible categories.
3. *Search for themes:* After reviewing the data several times, coding, and re-coding, it reached “saturation” and I began to search for patterns or themes among the codes. Within the MAXQDA program, I used a visual tool called “Code Maps” to better organize and identify possible themes through color codes and dragged/dropped them to assist me in maintaining a coherent chronology.
4. *Review potential themes:* Here I checked and re-checked the themes against the existing codes to ensure that they matched and extracted new codes that emerged during the previous two steps (including some inductive, as items and ideas appear without searching for them initially).
5. *Define and name themes:* This step aligned closely with the previous steps, as for theory-driven data analysis, themes had been initially generated throughout the

process. However, I renamed several of the themes to ensure they accurately capture the concept or idea that it represented.

6. *Produce the report*: I synthesized the data I collected and analyzed and reported it for the purpose of this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

Eight individuals volunteered to participate in the current study. Participants ranged in age from 19 years old to 64 years old, with an average age of 41.75 years. Seven of the participants identified as ciswomen and one participant identified as a cisman. All participants identified as White and/or Caucasian. Four of the participants were married, while four reported a single status. Geographically, all participants were from New England: four lived in Vermont, one lived in Massachusetts, one lived in Rhode Island, and two lived in Maine. All participants had a minimum of some college, and two were current students: one pursuing a bachelor's degree and the other pursuing a doctorate. Three of the eight participants had at least one master's degree.

### **How People Develop Interest in Animal Welfare**

How a person begins their journey into animal welfare or animal rights is personal, unique, and often profound. However, three themes were found among participants when they were asked to reflect on how their interest in animal welfare originated: (a) a natural interest or love for animals; (b) childhood experiences and family attitudes; and (c) conscious lifestyle choice for health, dietary reasons, and personal reasons.

#### **Natural Love or Interest for Animals**

All but two participants identified a pre-existing affection for animals when they reflected on the roots of their involvement. For example, Participant 5 recalls,

Well, it pretty much started out when I was a kid, I lived in a small apartment, we weren't allowed to have pets. So like most kids, you know, I was like, 'oh, I want a cat, I want a dog, I want a pony,' you know, but then I started, so I was the child who would be like, feeding all the neighborhood cats, I'm like, sticking frogs in my pockets and bringing them home, saying "Mom can I keep them?" grossing her out.

This interest in animals was prevalent early on in several participants' lives, as Participant 2 indicated that she "was always interested in animal welfare, reading books about it and becoming a member of various organizations." This strong love for animals is similarly reflected in Participant 3's response, "I would have to say animal welfare has been the largest issue I have involved myself with hands-on." Additionally, many participants (N = 6) identified their interest in animals developing during childhood because of early experiences or familial attitudes.

### **Childhood Experiences and Family Attitudes**

More than half of the participants spoke about early childhood experiences within their families of origin, and how attitudes toward animals were modeled for them at an early age. For some, having a parent or caregiver influenced their interest in animal welfare. Participant 1 recalled,

When I was ... when I was growing up, I'm an only child and when I was growing up my mom was a vegetarian at one point, and I never really understood her dietary choice- 'Cause I think it was really tied to that, but when I was going through this thing in 2012, I had assumed that my mother was a vegetarian because of the cruelty to animals.

Participant 7 also speaks to parental influences:

Uh, I think. Well, actually, my parents were, so my parents were vegetarian growing up. My dad especially. Um, and he's very health conscious. Um, started a hippie retreat up in Maine, and it's all vegetarian meals that you can eat there, and you can go up, like, once every summer. And, um, a lot of creative dancing and- and art and, uh, it's very interesting, very fun, thing that he has set up there.

Five of the participants cited having pets while they were growing up, highlighting the role of animals within families and the attitude toward them.

Participant 3 stated,

So it was definitely her [mother's] involvement with the shelter and everything. I think it really started with, like she was always fostering cats, and we always had foster cats in the house ... .um, yeah. So, I think Mom passed that onto me.

Participant 2 echoed this:

It was really cool when the girls were younger and I could, you know, bring home animals that were sick and they could help me get them better. Or bring home kittens and they could see that, you know, once they were big enough, they got adopted and that was really neat. To have them exposed to that.

Not all the participants' early childhood experiences with animals within the family were positive. Participant 8 reflects on her father's attitude toward animals:

and growing up in a household where my dad was not the best person with animals. He would get rid of cats like, you know, dump 'em off on the side-if they were producing too much instead of getting them spayed or neutered. Or, you know, he'd cut off the heads of our rooster if it attacked my mom. I mean it was just very violent. So, I would say that these were some of the influences, the experience from, you know, grade school, um, my father definitely was someone who kind of alerted to me, God, there's so much cruelty in the world, but like I said it was normalized. At one point it was like—Wait, it doesn't have to be this way.

Parental influence, for better or for worse, was prevalent among many participants' responses. Not all participants drew from early experiences; some found their interest in animal rights through initiating changes in their health and lifestyles.

### **Conscious Lifestyle Choices**

While many participants in this study cited family influences and upbringing as factors contributing to their interest in animal activism, others (N = 3) found their way to animal advocacy through personal volition and decision-making. All three of these respondents made the conscious choice to pursue a plant-based diet, either vegetarianism or veganism. Participant 7 explains how the decision to adopt a vegetarian diet prompted his interest in animal welfare:

I think it was mostly inspired through like, my own dietary changes. When I started becoming vegetarian, learning about um, the different types of food you can cook and- and all the different ... it's like a chain of information that you start to learn and read about. Um, we started learning about, you know, the health benefits of being vegetarian and also the types of sourcing that they come from. And also you start to sort of read about what's happening to animals and also how that affects your diet. And I have kind of learned a little bit more about the evolutionary history of why we are, you know, more suited to be vegetarian.

Participant 6 shared a similar experience, adopting a vegan lifestyle change and quickly becoming more aware of these actions and their implications:

Let's see ... Um, I had, I went vegan for one year because every January 1st I decide I'm gonna make one lifestyle change and keep it for one year, and then if I hate it, I stop. And, if I like it, I stick with it. And so, I didn't go vegan for any particular reason, I just thought, "Oh, here's this good thing to do for the planet and for myself." I learned how to cook better and stuff. But, um, after that first year, um, and maybe like a bit beyond that too, I actually started, like ... I don't know, I stopped feeling like meat was food. Um, and then I actually started caring about stuff too.

Participant 8 made a conscious decision to advocate for animals after learning of a local animal welfare story and exploring the existing animal protection laws in the community:

And that was my first introduction into the lack of protective laws for animals, well in this particular farm animals, and, um, that they're considered property and, therefore, things and not animals in their own rights and beings in their own right. At the time, in 2012, I was actually finishing up my master's degree in public administration and I was trying to become more involved in, you know, the policy. Not studying it, per se, but just understanding how public opinion affects policy and, and that kind of thing. So I really got interested in the animal, uh, thing from that perspective, because like I said the legislation doesn't protect animals and I was appalled. And so I called attorneys, and I called legislators and I called my professor in the program, just trying to understand how it all works. I realized that because it was such low level of protection that it was up to people of the public to really inform and change law. And policy. So, yeah, so that's what really threw it in for me. And, what was really odd is I, I think, I can't remember when that was occurring, it must've been the summer of 2012, but, at one point I woke up in the morning in September and I said, "I have to become a vegan."

These three themes (natural love for animals, early childhood experiences and familial attitudes, and conscious lifestyle choices) contributed to participants' decisions to become active in animal rights, advocacy, and welfare.

### **What Animal Activism Action Looks Like**

All participants in this study identified demonstrable action steps they took within their lives to promote animal activism or advocacy. Animal activism showed up in participants' lives in the following ways: (a) lifestyle/diet, (b) volunteering, (c) careers/occupations, (d) spreading awareness/networking, and (e) legislative advocacy.



## **Lifestyle/Diet**

By far, the most common theme was dietary choices, with six of the eight participants identifying as vegetarian or vegan. Participant 5 reported being vegetarian for five years; Participant 2 shared, “I’ve been vegetarian for 20 years and aspire to be vegan.” Similarly, Participant 8 responded, “I eat a plant-based diet and have been moving my lifestyle toward full veganism since 2012.”

One respondent spoke to feeling the need to justify his choices,

Uh, so I’m getting in that debate a lot because of being um, vegetarian. I shouldn’t have to engage in those topics and—and defend them. ... people notice. I mean, like that thing is, is- is when you are um, you know, eating vegetarian, I think they said that there’s something like 5% of America is on a strictly vegetarian or vegan diet.

While most participants made conscious lifestyle choices to help animals, many of them also demonstrated action steps by volunteering within their communities.

## **Volunteering**

Giving time and energy through volunteer work was apparent in interviewee’s responses as a way to help animals. Five of the eight interviewees identified volunteering as an important part of their action efforts toward animal welfare. Volunteering at (a) local shelters and (b) fostering homeless pets were two common engagement efforts reported by participants in this study.

### ***Giving to Local Shelters***

Five of the eight participants in this study had experience volunteering their time in local shelters. All respondents reported early experiences with volunteering in shelters and as an important component of their work to help animals. Four of these individuals spoke of their involvement in promoting TNR (Trap-Neuter-Release) programs for feral cats and offering spay and neuter clinics through the local shelters. Other duties reported by participants included

cleaning kennels, walking, and socializing adoptable animals, administering medications, and “front of the house” duties such as reception, filing, assisting with adoption applications and general administrative tasks. Participant 2 describes when she first became involved with volunteering: “And I started looking into, like volunteering at the shelter, so I started, I volunteered and then I got a job at the shelter, and I worked there for 20 years, until just last November.”

Participant 3 described her involvement on her college campus,

Yeah, yeah so, it’s a lot of fundraising on campus, like bake sales but it all adds up toward us going on those trips. And then we also do a lot with like, the local shelters, like every weekend we’ll have opportunities to go out to local shelters and volunteer hands-on with the cats, dogs, horses, cows, whatever. Um, so that was really fun. I’m definitely going to keep being involved.

In a similar vein, Participant 1 references the attraction to volunteering, sharing, “but you know, fifteen, twelve years ago, I got the bug.” The idea of this “pull” is reiterated by Participant 5:

I’ve actually been volunteering for [the shelter] for almost eight years now. And you know, I’ve been involved in other projects as well. But, the rescue, this one has been the longest. But I mean, the more I got involved, the more I wanted to get involved.”

The idea of shelter work was an integral part of respondents’ day-to-day lives as well as their identities.

### ***Fostering Homeless Pets***

Each of the five participants who identified shelter work as part of their animal welfare work also reported fostering as another component to their efforts. Participants spoke about kittens, senior cats and other vulnerable felines that needed extra support. Participant 2 stated, “I have a soft spot for the most vulnerable, old, sick kitties in the shelters and enjoyed nursing them back to health.” Participant 4 echoed this sentiment: “So my soft spot was always the senior

kitties, so anybody who came into the shelter who was ten and up, I always wanted to foster them and adopt them out from my home.”

### **Careers and Occupations**

The significance of animal welfare was reflected in half of the participants’ occupations and careers, as they identified jobs associated with helping animals. For these individuals, their interest in helping animals goes beyond volunteering and into professional careers. Four participants were employed in fields that directly or indirectly helped animals: Participant 3 and Participant 5 spent many years working as paid employees in shelters and as veterinary technicians; Participant 4 hosted a successful podcast that focused on cat welfare and served as president of a large feline rescue organization. She also reported that she served on multiple boards for several large rescue organizations and oversaw \$1.5 million budgets and regional mentoring programs for other shelters. Participant 8 worked in state government on policy issues; she said she intended to focus on animal welfare initiatives in the future.

In addition to the four participants whose occupations were informed by animal welfare, two participants were current students pursuing degrees in related fields, working with animals or the natural world. For example, Participant 3 was a current college student majoring in biology with a specialization in pre-veterinary medicine; she spoke to her aspiration of becoming a veterinarian for horses and large animals. In a similar vein, Participant 7 was a doctoral student studying environmental sustainability and human behavior. He spoke about the cyclical nature of sustainability and human behavior, especially toward animals and nature. He elaborated about his research:

for undergraduate students to use AVA procedures to change environmentally significant behavior. And that can involve eating and the way that people eat ... So, I’ll be sort of supervising students as they go out and do this kind of work. And, really it’s up to them to decide what they want to come up with, but there’s a lot of research on changing the

way that people eat, or changing the labeling for packaging, or changing just certain features to make it more, I guess, in simple terms, more noticeable- the impact that the products you're buying have on both animals, or on the environment.

In the spirit of public-facing efforts such as career choices and occupations, participants also demonstrated their commitment to animal advocacy and welfare through networking and spreading awareness about animal-related issues.

### **Networking and Spreading Awareness**

Communication used for networking and spreading awareness was a common theme among animal activists and advocates; with a subtheme of technology emerging through participants' responses. Six of the eight respondents identified raising awareness about animal-related issues, along with networking, as a significant component of their actionable efforts. A common subtheme was the use of technology, and specifically social media.

Participant 1 clearly identified "outreach efforts" as one of her contributions to the animal welfare movement; while Participant 2 expressed her ideals by stating, "I believe in treating all animals with respect and spreading awareness that they have emotions of fear, pain, happiness, etc." Going a step further, Participant 4 hosts a successful podcast used to interview feline experts and reach a large community of listeners in addition to "mentoring, education and outreach," concerning her work with cat overpopulation.

Participant 6 describes their involvement with events designed to raise local awareness, such as demonstrating at a parade "celebrating" livestock, and holding vigil:

Oh, and with the vigil, in front of the parade; I was so glad to have other people come up with me. It started as a solo venture, and then I was able to get some people involved, and they made such wonderful signs and brought their kids ... Oh, I actually tabled one night with [someone] from my sanctuary, and then the following day had a table set up with flowers and candles and just a small group of us had signs ... I really wanted it to be sort of a peaceful form of bearing witness.

Participant 8 similarly spoke at length about spreading awareness, connecting people, and providing support:

Through social media, I help spread awareness by sharing posts or providing commentary on existing posts from animal rights activists and environmental groups. I have written to and spoke with my state congressmen, I actively engage my city council members and city managers, I have written to heads of organizations questioning current practices...I am a member of a local animal welfare group and a known go-to in my area for wildlife and animal issues, acting as a 'go-between.'

Indeed, many of the participants in this study specifically spoke to the use of social media as a component to their outreach efforts. Four participants identified social media as a significant catalyst for their work:

### ***The Use of Technology and Social Media***

The use of social media as a tool for advocacy efforts emerged through half the participants' responses when asked about their demonstrable action steps within the movement. For instance, Participant 1 explicitly identified "outreach efforts" [through] social media as an activity on which she spent her time and energy. Similarly, Participant 4 hosted a podcast with over 200 episodes at the time of this study; she also discussed websites and online communities in which she was a member. She was an early adopter of online networking and social media for connecting people and providing a "hub" for animal-related issues. She described it as "a Craigslist or Freecycle-type of medium" she engaged with when she was first starting out with her efforts.

The importance of networking through social media is also reflected by Participant 5, who also relied on digital means to stay active (after her physical mobility worsened due to a disability):

The majority of [what I do now] on social media involves connecting potential adopters, rescuers, and other animal care workers to find placements for pets. I am active, and vocal, about ending the process of declawing cats, breed restrictions, and inhumane treatment of livestock.

Facebook and the internet in general were also useful for Participant 7, the vegetarian; he explained that it helps him learn about nutrition and sharing recipes and networking with different people. Going a step further, Participant 8 attributes much of her activism to Facebook as well:

So, in 2012, um, I don't remember how this happened, but it must've been through Facebook, which I think is an incredible medium for animal activism, 'cause that's how I learned a lot about what's going on in the world in general. I feel that posts can be very powerful through social media, so I've had some of my friends contact me directly in like private message, um, and just say, 'Hey, I'm thinking about going vegan' or 'Oh, my God, I'm appalled about these posts. You know, how do I get more educated?'

She went on to reflect on her own early experiences with Facebook and educating herself:

I started educating myself, so you get on Facebook—Obviously, as soon as you start posting or get associated with certain groups then you're bombarded with information, and I started watching movies.

While using social media to raise awareness and increase networking opportunities, some participants recognize the content shared on social media is not always conducive to their efforts.

Participant 8 elaborated,

so, I've stopped bombarding my own self with that information. Every once in a while, I'll share something on my Facebook page, but ... just for shock value, but it's, it's pretty rare these days.

Participant 6 acknowledged a similar sentiment:

And, you know, I would paste, post, like, pictures of, like, you know, "Help raise money for this, you know, dog's medical bills or whatever." And then, eventually people are like, "I don't even want to go to your page anymore because I don't like seeing that." And, I'm like, "Hm, you know, you're right. Like, maybe there's a better way to, to go about this."

As participants share their unique experiences of why they decided to become involved with helping animals, how this interest developed and what their involvement looked like within their lives, they were also encouraged to think about the possible benefits their work has brought, along with potential risks or downfalls associated with their efforts.

## **Effects of Animal Activism**

Active involvement with animal activism takes energy and passion, and brings along rewards and benefits, along with pitfalls and certain stressors. This reflects the commitment participants had to their work and were able to identify both welcomed and unintended consequences and how these impacted them. Participants openly discussed the effects their efforts had on their personal lives, in areas such as physical and social functioning. The pros or positive effects from engaging in animal advocacy work included (a) better physical health and being more “health conscious” in general, (b) increased social interactions and deeper connections, (c) personal growth and development, and (d) contributing to a greater good.

### **Positive Effects**

Participants in this study each had their unique reasons and justifications for wanting to help animals, but they all benefited from their work in similar ways. In general, participants spoke of increased social opportunities and building connections with others, followed by healthier lifestyle, personal growth, and a contribution to something greater than themselves.

### ***Social Connections***

By far, the most common theme among participants was the identification of the benefits of social interactions and deepening connections to others. Participant 4 describes some of her efforts with cat rescue, specifically from hoarding situations, and building positive relationships:

We’ve worked with quite a few hoarders, and I’ve become friendly with them because it’s not all their fault, it’s the community’s. It’s the community’s responsibility and you need to be friendly with them, you need to understand ... some of them were great, they would collect stuff for our yard sales, and they would refer people to us- once they realized, once they came into the shelter, once they understood, met the people, learned who we were, became friendly with us, that we weren’t adversarial at all. I’m ok referring people who show up at my doorstep—to say drive down the street, to go to the feline rescue society and they will help you because you’re local.

Participant 5 goes on to acknowledge how the social aspect of activism and working together was a significant social benefit for her personally:

Socially, it definitely helped me get out of my shell more, because ... one on one, I'm very good talking with people, like I can be funny, I can be friendly. But I have a lot of anxiety. And depression. It's a huge social benefit.

It goes without saying that positive social connections are essential for health and wellbeing. Participant 8 goes on to explain the deep connection felt to others doing similar work:

But for those people who are connected really because of animal advocacy and animals being beings in their own right, and that sort of thing, there really is just such a deeper level of understanding and connectivity with people.

Participant 6 also spoke about the social aspect, especially when it came to dietary choices related to vegetarian and vegan lifestyles:

Well, it's certainly a conversation starter, because eating is always a social activity. Or, it's not always a social activity, but it's certainly, like, a three times daily activity, um, that is often, you know, in a social space.

Participant 7 echoed similar thoughts about his experience with how sharing food and meals can create opportunities for social interactions and discussions:

Again, you bring it to the table and now the person's looking at what you're eating and next thing you know, you're talking to that person about all these different topics. Which is simply you're just bringing a plate to the table and all these topics come up all the time in relation to those simple things. So, it just started with me saying I wanted to ... I'm in this whole, like, network of discussion around all these different ethical issues.

He goes on to elaborate:

There's all this involvement and all the different communities and different people that I engage in those ideas on various levels. So, while I did start with them, I think that it's just been a constant evolvement of my interacting with new people.

While Participant 7 explained above how his efforts lend themselves to social opportunities, he also acknowledged that his reason initially was to explore a plant-based diet for personal health reasons.



### ***Physical Health Benefits***

As some participants intentionally made changes to their lifestyles for health reasons and only then became aware of animal-related issues, other participants discovered physical health benefits are an added bonus. Participants spoke to the reciprocal nature of how improving one's health can also improve the health of the natural environment. Additionally, for some participants, the interest in a healthier diet also led to interest in other health-related issues.

Participant 7 explains:

I think that when you do start making those health-conscious choices, there's a lot of information out there about now you're doing yoga, or now you're like, doing, you know, uh, vegan diets, or now you're like, drinking certain, like, juices, and all this. So, there's a lot of different, like, physical health-related things that come with it and then I think people tend to get interested in some of the other practices that you can do. Meditation, yoga, those things that sort of play in. Eat healthy, yoga takes an hour out of your day. Like, going for a run takes an hour out of your day. And then, um, yeah, so, there's a whole process, and really getting- betting those kinds of practices and routines into your daily culture is definitely not the easiest thing to do.

Not all of the participants spoke to the physical benefits of animal advocacy work;

Participant 7 identified as a vegan but acknowledged this does not necessarily correlate with increased physical wellbeing:

Let's see ... Physically, I'm not really sure. Um, my weight has not changed since high school or anything, um, I had my cholesterol tested and I was actually disappointed to learn that my cholesterol was that of the average vegetarian. Um, I mean, I wasn't really worried about it to begin with. But, I thought, Huh, I've been vegan for 10 years and I'm still like a vegetarian with my tri, with my cholesterol levels. Um, I mean, I wouldn't say that I'm, I'm any, like, stronger or fitter or healthier because of being vegan. I think I've just been able to maintain a healthy lifestyle because I was always interested in sports. And I'm not always a super healthy vegan. I have Twizzlers at my house right now and vegan ice cream.

### ***Personal Growth***

Participants identified personal growth as a benefit to their work in helping animals, for example, gaining confidence and assertiveness. Participant 6 discussed how her activism helped her become more assertive, while also becoming more sensitive to the world around her.

Um, I've definitely become more confident about asserting my needs, uh, you know, which always sounds kind of bad, like, Oh, I have to be so assertive. But I was very timid and almost embarrassed about it when I was first starting out. Like, I remember being in a restaurant in Chicago and, um, the, a waiter had sprinkled Parmesan cheese on my pasta at the last second and I didn't say anything; I just, I just ate it anyway., I, like, made a face, but I, I didn't want to be, like ... You know, I was so worried about being one of those vegans- making a scene or, you know, or like making waste, that-that I, I just ... Ugh. I wouldn't do that now.

She goes on to explain how her choices impacted her:

Um, and I think after being vegan for a while and being involved with, you know, with, um, in certain causes, I guess I've just felt both ... More sensitive, but also more empowered.

In a similar vein, Participant 5 described a feeling of “confidence” in herself after gaining “experience and familiarity” through volunteering and animal advocacy work. This confidence, she believed, helped her make friends and overcome “social anxiety” when she moved to a new state and began meeting new people.

In addition to gaining assertiveness and confidence, Participant 8 spoke to a new way of seeing the world and a greater awareness:

It's very easy to get caught up in, you know, your day-to-day ... like commercial living and just kind of be asleep at the wheel. I found that very gratifying. it's definitely as rewarding as it is on one hand to be really connected to people and to nature and open to the opportunity that every day brings new awakening.

Most participants alluded to some sort of personal change or transformation in the form of increased self-awareness, greater understanding of the world around them and ultimately, a connection to something larger than themselves. When engaging in work on deep, meaningful level, it becomes internalized and reflects who they are as individuals.

### ***Contributing to a Greater Good***

At least half of the participants in this study directly or indirectly referenced the idea of a greater good, or connection to something larger than oneself. For example, Participant 8 spoke to

a “deeper level of understanding through connection,” acknowledging something bigger than herself.

Participant 7, who was a doctoral candidate studying environmental sustainability and human behavior, acknowledged the impact peoples’ consumer behavior could have on the greater health of the natural environment through his research:

For undergraduate students to use AVA procedures to change environmentally significant behavior. And that can involve eating and the way that people eat. I basically adopted that course, and I’m doing that for my doctorate program. ... but there’s a lot of research on changing the way that people eat, or changing the- the labeling for packaging, or changing just certain features to make- make it more, I guess, simple terms, more noticeable, the impact that the products you’re buying have, on both animals, or on the environment. So, when I say sustainability, um, it does include, you know, animal rights’ – ethics.

In addition to the positive benefits of involvement in advocacy work (increased self-awareness, connection to others and larger communities, confidence and assertiveness, greater sensitivity for others), this can also lead to negative effects such as stress and burnout. As Participant 8 noted, “It’s stressful to be in contact with stuff about animal advocacy because there’s a lot of heartbreak in it.”

### **Negative Effects**

Seven participants reported some level of stress associated with animal advocacy or welfare work. At least half of the individuals reported “burn out” or “compassion fatigue” as an associated risk to engaging in this type of work. Adhering to a stricter (i.e., plant-based, cruelty-free) lifestyle also presented some challenges. The ideas of self-care and developing coping strategies were apparent throughout the interviews with all eight participants.

### ***Lifestyle/Diet Restrictions***

Five of the eight participants reported adopting a vegetarian diet and/or vegan lifestyle; a sixth participant had previously identified as vegetarian but indicated that it had been difficult to

maintain. By adopting stricter dietary guidelines and/or limited consumer options to support a cruelty-free lifestyle, participants identified this as one of the more challenging aspects of their work. Additionally, some identified stigma or responses from others as a challenge.

For example, Participant 2 started off her interview by stating, “I’m vegetarian. I try to be vegan, but it’s really hard.” She identified as a vegetarian (striving toward vegan) and agreed it could be difficult at mealtimes with other family members who did not share in this, and creating some separation from her family when making and eating different meals from what her husband and children have. Challenges associated with dietary restrictions were not uncommon in responses.

Participant 3 reported:

Trying to keep up with being vegetarian—well, vegetarian I haven’t had an issue with, honestly, I’ve been able to work around it just fine. But when it comes to more vegan options, it’s really difficult to find people to do things like that with, especially being a college student. It’s like, impossible to find anything reasonable in the dining hall to eat. Like, there are vegan things but just not things I would normally eat.

Participant 6 shared an interesting preface to her pursuing a cruelty-free lifestyle: “I felt an obstacle for me getting involved with animal rights issues because I felt like that was something that rich kids did.” She shared that she grew up poor, in a “hunting family.”

I had to really sort out a lot of feelings on, like, “Well, of course poor people can be vegan, of course poor people aren’t too stupid or indifferent to care about what they’re eating.” I didn’t want to buy into the ideas that factory farms could feed the world, um, so that’s why poor people have to have factory farmed eggs. I thought, “Well, that’s degrading.” I don’t want to, I don’t want, you know, poor people eating things that are bad for them and bad for other creatures. Just because they’re poor. Instead, let’s, let’s be better than that. Um, so, that was something that I found kind of challenging. It, it took me a bit to just sort of, like, find my own way.

Participant 7 also spoke to not only the challenges associated with embarking on a restricted or non-traditional diet, but also reactions and responses he receives from others regarding his choices.

Again, there's a lot of criticism that comes from it. Um, and I think that one of the biggest one is, "Well, how do you get your protein?" Or something like that ... I've noticed too, like, cooking vegetarian food is not easy. Eating healthy, yoga takes an hour out of your day. Like, going for a run takes an hour out of your day. And then, um, yeah, so, there's a whole process, and really getting those kinds of practices and routines into your daily culture is definitely not the easiest thing to do.

Once someone adopts a more humane, cruelty-free way of living, it became internalized and part of the person, as Participant 8 describes:

It's hard. I, I know for one thing that it's not something that I would ever give up in my life though. There's some people that go to veganism and then they give it up, but I don't see that ever happening. In my case. I can't say ... never say never, but it just, to me, it just seems like it's a very natural part of my life. And it should've always been this way.

She went on to illustrate how her activism and involvement impacted some of her relationships in her life, especially through posting on social media and how others perceived her beliefs and lifestyle:

Oh, yeah, and I've lost, actually I lost quite a few friends because I- I mean, I was posting graphic pictures every day of like the horrors of factory farming or backyard stuff. ...it's been difficult. I mean I, I even had a, a major disagreement with my mother about it because she thought I was a fanatic at one point. And so, you know, I had to explain to her, okay, there's this elastic band of fact, but ... and we've since talked through it and kinda found a medium ground, and I think it was also a way for me to find a better way for me to express myself. And, you know, this stuff exists way before I peeled away the layers of my own eyes. So, um, yeah, it's been hard for me to adjust.

### ***Burnout and Compassion Fatigue***

Six of the eight participants spoke directly to the experience of burnout or compassion fatigue. For example, Participant 2 recalled the risk of burnout associated with the years she spent working at an animal shelter.

Definitely I was able to not get burned out at work, probably because I was only part time. I was able to shut it off and come home, knowing other people were there.

But she also described the stressors and heartbreak of fostering sick, elderly and injured cats in her home, recalling one particular instance:

The whole physical suffering, he was suffering so bad. That was kind of a big burn out for me. Once we had to put him down, it was like, “oh I don’t know if I could ever go through this again. That was really hard.

Participant 3 spoke to her personal experiences with burnout and stress though she was 20 years old and just starting her journey into animal advocacy and welfare:

I don’t think I’ve ever reached that mental exhaustion point. It’s like I understand that this is not something I created but something we can help. It’s like a ... not hardening, but just exposure through experiences. I got used to it.

Another participant reflected on how activism in general can lead to this stress or burnout experience, especially considering involvement in one cause can open one’s eyes to other similar causes as well.

Yeah, and, I mean, I think it’s that way for someone who’s involved with any kind of activism ... You know, like, that’s gotta take its toll on people. And just being sort of aware of, you know, different causes that need our attention. That can kind of, like, burn me out. Because I’m like, out of the bandwidth.

Participant 8 also spoke to a similar feeling and experience, the emotional toll that comes with the recognition of the reasons behind the cause:

It comes with consider costs though because, you know, you wake up every morning and you know that there’s a tremendous amount of cruelty, accepted cruelty, and indifference towards it. Um, that’s been hard and so would I do things differently? No, I’d probably still make the same choices.

**Self-care and Stress Management.** A common theme among participants was the importance of self-care and managing one’s stress and emotional reactions. Self-care was emphasized many times throughout the interviews; Participant 4 even went as far as to record several podcasts about burnout and self-care in the animal rescue world. Many of the participants identified ways they coped with stress including maintaining a healthy lifestyle through diet and exercise, spending time in nature, taking a break from news and social media, connecting with others, and engaging in other enjoyable activities. A main takeaway from these responses

reflected the importance of taking a break or stepping away from the work periodically as a way to reduce stress, burnout and compassion fatigue.

Participant 6 shared:

I like to go for walks and I listen to music with, with headphones. That helps me to reset myself. I also try to spend Shabbat not going onto any social media or, like, not reading news I get it, like, there's a lot of very caring people in the world, but we do take breaks.

Participant 8 also spoke to the importance of disconnecting or taking a break from the work every so often, to support one's own health and wellbeing:

And I'm not even involved with it as much as some people are. I've had to disconnect myself from it. Ignoring it is not a great thing because, of course, things don't get done, so I think that's why I've actually turned more in. the individual path. I've stopped bombarding my own self with that information. Every once in a while, I'll share something on my Facebook page, but ... just for shock value, but it's, it's pretty rare these days. I spend a lot of time in nature. I try to get out. I walk every day, but I also try to hike and I just go alone with the dogs to be away from people, because I've found that, being involved with this kind of thing makes me need to be away from people a lot. And eat a healthy diet, which I think makes a big difference in how you feel.

### **Gendered Differences**

One individual identified as male participated in this study; the remaining seven participants identified as female. Every participant agreed that the animal welfare movement was female dominated. Participants reported higher rates of female involvement in volunteers at shelters and rescue organizations, more females who fostered pets; the participant who hosted a podcast reported a predominance of female listeners. When asked about the role of men, several participants reported that pet ownership among men was increasing (as they observed from working in shelters or rescue). Several also reported that management positions within organizations (executive director, for example) were more often occupied by men.

### ***Gendered Stereotype Experiences***

Participants reported what could be considered stereotypical gendered experiences and possible sexism in animal rights involvement. For example, Participant 8 recalled the way her

advocacy began, as she identified being bullied as a child and developed a desire to speak up for others, including animals. As she is in a career with state government where she works on policy and spends time lobbying and participating in legislative advocacy, she stated:

so, when I was there I didn't have the same credibility as say a man. You know, it just, if I had been a man, I know it would've been seen differently .... So, there were certain limitations because I was a woman. I'm also resentful of the fact that, you know.

Participant 6 spoke to her experience as an animal activist and how she viewed gender within this world, specifically what she referred to as “bad boys of veganism” who use machismo, strength, and threat of violence to get their message across. She goes on to explain:

There have been other activists who have been, male activists who have been banned from certain spaces because they kept sexually harassing people. I mean, it's like any other space, where it, it's, you need to be able to assert a space as safe and feminist.

The sole male participant of this study spoke to his experience of navigating a female-dominated world of animal welfare and advocacy. He recognized and identified ways in which his identified gender impacted his experience, noting:

I've rarely gotten much push back from females about being vegetarian or about having concern about animals. All my girlfriends are just like, 'Oh, that's awesome, like, so cool. I like this, I like this initiative you're doing, or I like this. And then, like, my guy friends will find some horribly like, outlandish thing to say to just- to get at me about it. I get a lot of support from a lot of my female friends. Even at work, you know, the guys there are just like, 'Chicken, I'm eating a chicken. Like a whole chicken,' and then I'll be cooking something vegetarian and everyone—all the females are coming up and like, 'Oh, that's so awesome. Like, that's so cool. Like, what are you making? Like, teach me how to make that' And it's like, I don't know, I try not to hold the bias there because I'm coming from my own sample of people that I know.... and it could just be that the guys that I know tend to eat more meat in general. So, I don't know if that is going to represent the whole population of guys out there.

Participants' responses suggest they have experienced gender-based stereotypes and stigmas exist within their own work toward animal welfare and animal advocacy. Some participants felt that they weren't taken seriously due to the perception of animal rights as a



“woman’s issue.” Female participants talked about the ways that gender may have affected their credibility and “aggressive” masculine attitudes toward their advocacy work.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

Exploring the role of animal rights and the lives of those who advocate on behalf of non-human animals is a worthwhile endeavor in understanding larger social justice contexts. Social justice movements have been and are a part of everyday society, as members of marginalized groups and their allies work together to fight and dismantle oppression. This is apparent in the ongoing advocacy on behalf of minority groups including, for example, women, BIPOC and LGBTQ+. Even as progress is notable, however, the struggle persists in part because patriarchy does not necessarily value the civil and human rights of all.

In recent years, researchers and advocates are increasingly recognizing the intersectionality of marginalized communities, incorporating animals and nature into a larger ecofeminist understanding of oppression. The animal rights movement has gained attention in recent decades, in part due to awareness of this complex relationship between humans and the natural world. In particular, women and animals historically experience a mutual oppression as a result of a patriarchal and capitalistic society; this shared historical subjugation may help explain why the animal rights movement is comprised primarily of women.

Although animal protection has steadily grown in popularity over the last several decades, research on it and its members has been relatively scarce. Little is known about the participants, including how their interest developed, how it is reflected in their lives, and the overall impact it has on them. Additionally, there has been limited research exploring the role of gender in animal activism. This study sought to investigate these questions surrounding this phenomenon.

### **Summary of Findings and Interpretations**

The results of this study concluded that, according to this sample, most participants identified as female (seven of eight participants). Additionally, all participants identified as White or Caucasian. All participants had a minimum of some college education. The average age of the participants was 41.75 years (see Appendix E for demographic information). These findings are consistent with existing literature on the prevalence of female animal activists (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993; Herzog & Galvin, 1998; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Plous, 1991; Shapiro, 1994). Additionally, other demographic results are consistent with past research on the topic; the movement is predominantly comprised of women who are White/Caucasian, college educated, and “middle-aged” (e.g., Herzog & Galvin, 1998; Jamison & Lunch, 1992; Shapiro, 1994).

#### **Developing an Interest in Animal Activism**

When asked how their interest in animal rights or animal welfare began, participants reported a natural or pre-existing love for animals. This phenomenon also appeared in participants who did not grow up with pets but were brought up in families which demonstrated kindness and respect toward animals. This finding is also consistent with previous studies, suggesting that family and upbringing with pro-animal attitudes contributed to increased concern for animals (Arluke, 2003; Pallotta, 2008). Other participants indicated that a conscious lifestyle choice or precipitating event prompted their interest in animal welfare, such as adopting a vegetarian lifestyle for health reasons and developing more pro-animal attitudes because of acquiring a deeper level of knowledge and understanding. Thus, there are many avenues available towards activism and early family influence is only one pathway. Conscious and intentional adult decision-making appears to be another.

### **Animal Activism in Action**

Participants' adult commitment to animal rights was reflected in several ways. Half the participants reported embracing a vegetarian or vegan diet and/or lifestyle, along with a conscious consumer approach to purchasing more "cruelty-free" and "eco-friendly" products. This is in line with previous studies exploring the idea of vegan or vegetarian lifestyles among animal activists (Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014; Herzog & Golden, 2009; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002; McDonald, 2000; Pallotta, 2008; Plous, 1998). In fact, previous studies also revealed that nearly half of animal activists are vegetarian (Herzog & Golden, 2009; Plous, 1991). Taken together, these findings speak to the importance for animal activists to live in accordance with their values—reducing suffering for animals and embracing a cruelty-free lifestyle through dietary and consumer choices (Gaarder, 2008; Herzog, 1993).

In my study, participants were all engaged in contributing time and energy to animal welfare (per recruitment conditions), and many were volunteers in animal rescue, fostering animals, and working in animal shelters. Going a step further, many participants also chose careers and occupations that reflected their commitment to animal rights, such as lobbying efforts and education/outreach. These demonstrable actions reported among participants in this study are consistent with previous studies which show that activism often includes volunteering, rescuing, and fostering animals (Gaarder, 2008).

### **Effects of Animal Activism**

Participants spoke about both positive and negative impacts of animal welfare advocacy. Positive impacts included increased social connections, physical health benefits, personal growth (such as confidence and assertiveness), and the feeling of contributing to, or being a part of, a greater good or cause. These findings are in line with previous research. For example, Gaarder

(2008) also found that animal activists reported positive effects including higher levels of awareness about political issues, greater self-confidence, feelings of making a difference, and viewing their lives as more meaningful. Taken together, these findings align well with the idea that volunteering and/or activism is related to hedonic, eudemonic, and social wellbeing (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Engagement in activism, as with other types of helping or altruistic behaviors are linked to feelings of overall personal satisfaction.

Participants also reported negative effects from pursuing their commitment to animals. Burnout and compassion fatigue were among the main negative experiences associated with the ongoing struggle for animal rights. Previous research similarly finds that advocacy work carries the risk of burnout (Gaarder, 2008; Shapiro, 1994). Participants also spoke to the perhaps lesser but still significant personal stress of adhering to lifestyle and dietary restrictions including living as a vegan in an omnivorous world. It is notable that participants identified the challenges they faced in living according to their values—this may be much more difficult than merely espousing lofty ideas.

### **Gendered Observations**

Gendered experiences and observations were also shared by participants in this study. The feeling of not being taken seriously or lacking legitimacy was reported among respondents, including the male participant (as indicating some “pushback” or mocking from male peers for his beliefs and choices). Participants also observed a predominance of females within their own animal-related networks, shelters, or organizations. This last finding is not surprising given what is already known about the connection between women’s and animal rights.

## Implications

The results of this study are largely in line with existing studies about animal activists in terms of demographics, how their interest developed, how they demonstrate their commitment, and the effects or impacts their work has on them. These consistent results suggest that the composition of the animal rights movement has not changed much over the past few decades, as advocates continue to be predominantly White, middle-aged females with some college education.

Since the activity of volunteering is more available to those with discretionary time and resources, it may appear to those outside the movement that advocacy is for the privileged. Beyond gender, the racial, educational, and socioeconomic identities of activists may also make it harder for the animal rights movement to be taken more seriously as a social justice issue.

Some interesting features within the results emerged from this study. One is the presence of animal-related careers and occupations among participants. Previous studies investigating the lives of animal activists did not specifically identify careers or occupations as a component of animal welfare work. In this study, half of the participants reported pursuing a career in a field related to animal welfare and/or the environment. Given the context of this research question, many of the existing studies on animal activists are outdated and the increased presence of women in careers, especially animal-related fields, may reflect a change of the times. It may be likely that in coming years, more activists will report on careers and occupations related to animal welfare, rather than volunteering.

Another “sign of the times” compared to previous studies is the use of technology and social media in animal welfare involvement. This is a new finding and a factor (phenomenon) that was not commonly discussed in previous literature about animal rights. The use of

technology, the internet and social media has grown exponentially over the last few decades and with it, a greater ability to reach and connect people. Beginning with my recruitment—through social media and contacting animal rights groups on platforms such as Facebook—animal rights activists connect increasingly through online networking. Currently spreading awareness, education and outreach are important components of all social justice movements; animal rights advocacy is no different. The broad and vast dissemination of information online holds the possibility for broadening the animal rights movement to become more informed and inclusive.

Not incidentally, vegetarians and vegans have a vast online presence and support, and it is likely that the stigma felt by some of my participants will diminish as time goes on. Further, online petitions are a popular presence in social media, often drawing attention from tens of thousands of people, and frequently resulting in enough signatures to contribute to legislative and social changes. These online petitions, such as [www.change.org](http://www.change.org), can mobilize thousands if not millions of supporters for a magnitude of causes; increasing the opportunities for these issues to reach broader audiences, including decision-makers.

While I hoped to contribute new insights to the discourse on gender and animal advocacy, the data I collected, almost entirely from cis females, served more to underscore some powerful ideas embraced by the ecofeminist framework for the project. The experience of marginalization and feelings of not being taken seriously for their efforts seem to reflect society's larger, dismissive view of women. Notably, both women volunteering in shelters and engaging in lobbying and legislative advocacy efforts spoke to the stress of animal rights work. Interestingly, the male participant in this study reported that male friends of his often gave him a hard time about his beliefs and lifestyle choices, and felt his female friends were significantly more supportive of his efforts. Gender roles and expressions are played out in participants' lives

and further suggest an enduring parallel struggle between animal rights and women's rights. Indeed, as long as animal rights are seen by the public as a "women's" issue, others, particularly men, may be less likely to think seriously about the commitment and the cause.

### **Limitations**

As with all qualitative studies involving samples of convenience, this exploration has some important limitations. First, I was unable to explore the connection between gender identity and animal activism as robustly as I had hoped. With more men in the sample, I might have been able to explore the role of gender in animal welfare more in depth and to a richer degree.

The study had geographical limitations. I interviewed participants in the New England area only, specifically Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Attitudes toward animal welfare differs across geographical areas within the United States. For example, compared to other parts of the country, the Northeast has more spay and neuter projects aimed to control unwanted animal populations. By contrast, in the South, these types of efforts are essentially non-existent. With greater geographical diversity, I might have uncovered a broader range of themes across areas of inquiry.

This sample was also racially and culturally nondiverse—all the participants were White, cis-gendered, educated, and middle class. It would have been fascinating and worthwhile to be able to explore intersectionality of identity (race, ethnicity, ability, religion, immigrant status, etc.) in light of animal rights activism.

Finally, recruitment strategies limited my interviews to participants with access to internet. Individuals who did not have internet access or who were not actively using social media were excluded from this study. Since the role of technology and social media played such



a large role in participants' involvement in advocacy, this is a major recruitment method but limits recruitment of those who may lack access or engagement.

### **Clinical Implications**

For therapists and other mental health professionals who may find themselves working with animal activists, this is worth exploring as to not only better understand their clients, but how clients understand themselves. When working with individuals who engage in animal welfare work, this has clinical implications. Themes that emerged through this and other studies could provide valuable insights for therapists.

For example, individuals who devote their time and energy to causes such as animal welfare and animal rights often have a deep, personal connection to their work. People who actively participate in volunteering or giving to social issues often find meaning in this work and is in accordance with their personal values. Understanding a client's value system and how it is reflected in their everyday lives could provide important and meaningful information for a therapist. Connection, meaning, purpose, and other aspects of animal activism work could be worthy of exploring and utilizing in a strength-based approach. By exploring the benefits of participating in this type of work, therapists could help clients identify and utilize the positive effects of their work.

Conversely, the negative effects of engaging in activism work can also have implications for therapists and mental health providers. Individuals who invest their time and energy into activism work—including animal rights—are subject to negative (challenging, problematic) effects such as burnout and compassion fatigue. By consistent exposure to pain and suffering, to feeling misunderstood or disconnected from friends and loved ones, this work can result in increased stress and emotional fatigue. Therapists should be aware of the possible negative

effects of animal welfare work and be willing to explore ways to manage stress associated with this work.

On a larger scale, therapists should be able to recognize societal influences and consequences on individuals. For example, feminist therapists focus on issues such as oppression, stereotypes, and violence against women and how these societal norms impact female experiences (Evans et al., 2010). By having a greater understanding of intersections of oppression, specifically women and animals, perhaps therapist could develop a more robust clinical formulation of their clients.

One way to gather this information is to include questions during an initial intake. During the interview, therapists would benefit from asking clients about animals and pets, and what their experiences have been. Additionally, asking about any volunteer or charity work would also provide insight into a client.

### **Future Directions**

Future directions of research would benefit from more quantitative studies and longitudinal studies investigating the animal rights movement and how it intersects with other social justice causes. Many of the existing studies are outdated and qualitative in nature. Quantitative studies designed to collect and analyze objective data could be useful as an additional way to further “legitimize” research in this area. In addition, further qualitative exploration is warranted, delving into broader questions of animal rights, and social, economic, and environmental justice. Some argue that social justice is supported and promoted best through qualitative research, allowing members of marginalized groups to speak for themselves (Guishard et al., 2018; Lyons et al., 2013). Exploring differences over time longitudinally could

also yield novel and potentially useful data. For example, it might be interesting to investigate if participants' experiences shifted in a 20-year follow up study.

My study began with a binary premise that the experiences of activist men and women would be different. Future research might do well to explore the role of gender in activism in a more inclusive fashion. For example, it would be interesting to speak to queer and non-binary activists from other areas of advocacy and find out about their experience of interconnections among oppressed groups—including animals and the environment, too. I remain curious about the absence of men in animal rights activism and imagine more targeted recruitment strategies would be useful, especially since men are currently in a minority in this sphere.

More research on other demographics (e.g., race, religion, geography, SES) is also called for to better understand the many intersections in marginalization of non-dominant groups. In the last several years, the idea behind “intersectional environmentalism” (Thomas, 2020, 2022) has grown in popularity, especially following the Black Lives Matter movement, expanding on the ideas of eco-feminism to include the protection of both people and the planet, especially the marginalized and vulnerable groups. Thomas (2020) explains while ecofeminism focuses on the repression of women and the environment as interconnected and as a product of larger patriarchal structures, intersectional environmentalism goes a step further to demonstrate how injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth—not just women—are mutually interconnected.

Exploring the intersectionality of environmentalism and animal rights may further legitimize the animal rights movement; considering most animal activists hold some social privilege (White, educated, middle-class). To this point, Kings (2017) argues that “reflecting

upon one's position, especially when speaking from a point of privilege, helps to avoid the unintentional marginalization of other groups or identities" (p. 64).

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, the animal rights movement has slowly grown and diversified, beginning to draw support from people of all walks of life. Many individuals are motivated by concerns over the treatment of animals in various industries, such as factory farming, fur farming, animal testing, and entertainment industries. Activists may engage in a range of activities, including volunteering, boycotting, grassroots organizing, legal advocacy, lobbying, and peaceful protests. The movement would benefit from more diverse voices and perspectives, emphasizing that animal rights intersect with other social justice issues. By understanding and addressing these intersections, activists and advocates can work towards a more inclusive and compassionate society for all beings.

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**APPENDIX A: EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM**

**Expression of Interest Form**

Name:

Phone number:

Email address:

Physical address:

Date of Birth:

Gender (if applicable):

Marital status:

Level of education:

Race/ethnicity:

Length of involvement in Animal Rights (describe your actions):

Involvement in other another activism groups (describe):

Please return by mail to:

Erin McKenney

XXX Xxxxx Street

XXXXXXXXXX, VT 05602

Or:

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to take part in a research study of the experiences of animal activists: their reasons for becoming involved, the impact it has on their lives, the role gender has (if any) and involvement in other causes. We are asking you to take part because you expressed interest in this study from an online animal rights group for this study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of animal rights activists as it relates to the movement. You must self-identify as an animal activist, have formal membership to at least one animal-related organization and demonstrable evidence of participation in animal rights-related activities.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about yourself, how you became interested in the animal rights movement, what your involvement looks like, what impact it has had on you, the role gender has played in your activism and if you are involved with any additional causes or movements. The interview will take anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours to complete. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview.

*Risks and benefits:*

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in “day-to-day life.”

Benefits include the opportunity to share your experiences, thoughts and feelings about something that is presumably important to you. This study may help the animal rights movement.

Compensation: Each participant will receive a \$25 donation to the animal or environmental charity of his or her choice.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. If we tape-record the interview, we will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which we anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researchers conducting this study are Erin McKenney and her advisor Dr. Susan Hawes. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Erin McKenney at [redacted]. You can reach Dr. Susan Hawes at [redacted]. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or access their website.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name(printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.*

## APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- How did you become involved?
  - Probe: When and where did it begin?
  - Probe: What is it about you that was drawn to become an animal activist?
  - Probe: What experiences influenced you?
  - Probe: Who do you think influenced you?
  - Probe: Did you run into any obstacles along the way? If so, what were these?
- What kinds of activities or actions do you participate in?
  - Probe: Are you involved in specific group actions? If yes, please describe.
    - Follow-up: Are you more of a solo activist? If yes, please describe.
  - Probe: What are your reasons or justifications for engaging in these activities?
- What effect has your involvement in this movement had on you and your life?
  - Describe any benefits your involvement has had on you.
    - Socially? Emotionally? Psychologically? Physically?
  - Describe any challenges or risks you have experienced.
    - Socially? Emotionally? Psychologically? Physically?
- What role (if any) has your gender played in your activism in this movement?
- Describe other causes or issues you are committed to or involved in.
- Please provide any additional questions, answers or information that you believe is important or relevant to your work and/or this study.



**APPENDIX D: ANALYSIS TEMPLATE**

## Initial Comments Template

Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments

**APPENDIX E: TABLE WITH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Education level</b>
1 - Lucy	female	MA	64	Caucasian/White	married	Multiple master's degrees
2 - Cate	female	ME	49	Caucasian/White	married	Associates in Applied Science
3 - Sarah	female	ME	19	White	Single	Current college student
4 - Anne	female	VT	51	White	Married	Bachelor's degree
5 - Tracy	female	RI	43	Caucasian	Married	Some college and trade school
6 - Jane	female	VT	30	Caucasian	Single	Bachelor's degree
7 - Nate	male	VT	31	White/Caucasian	Single	Masters, PhD in progress
8 - Alice	female	VT	47	White	Single	Master's degree