

---

## Loving Them to Death: Blame-Displacing Strategies of Animal Shelter Workers and Surrenderers

Stephanie S. Frommer<sup>1</sup> and Arnold Arluke

TUFTS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

*This article examines how shelter workers and individuals who surrender their companion animals to shelters manage guilt about killing previously valued animals. Researchers used an ethnographic approach that entailed open-ended interviews and direct observations of workers and surrenderers in a major, metropolitan shelter. Both workers and surrenderers used blame displacement as a mechanism for dealing with their guilt over euthanasia or its possibility. Understanding this coping strategy provides insights into how society continues to relinquish animal companions—despite the animals' chances of death—as well as how shelter workers cope with killing the animals they aim to protect.*

Millions of healthy animals are euthanized each year in American shelters. Estimates of yearly euthanasia rates vary from 2.4 million dogs (Patronek & Rowan, 1995) to 11.1 to 18.6 million cats and dogs (Nassar, Talboy, & Moulton, 1992). Even a 5% euthanasia rate, a conservative estimate, shows that an unacceptably large number of animals are being euthanized (Rowan, 1992).

One might suppose that many of the animals turned in to shelters are strays. Alternatively, one might suppose they represent the remnants of puppy and kitten litters, those for whom a home could not be found. But the truth is that many euthanized animals are companion animals surrendered by their caregivers (Patronek & Glickman, 1994).

Research suggests that surrenderers who relinquish companion animals may experience feelings of conflict, doubt, regret, and shame—key components of guilt (Henry, 1973). DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998) report that the vast majority of surrenderers find relinquishment a difficult and complex decision. McNicholas and Collis (1995) point out that many pet owners have strong feelings of doubt about the necessity or inevitability of euthanasia when discussing its elective possibility for their ill or elderly pets—even when they are convinced that it's the kindest thing to do.

Arkow and Dow (1984) claim that those who acquire dogs for companionship rather than for utilitarian purposes, such as guarding a home, regret surrendering their pets and acknowledge that they would choose to keep them if the problems leading to relinquishment could be resolved. Dorr Research Corporation (1994) and Patronek (1995) even contend that many pet owners are unwilling to admit to relinquishment, suggesting that they were ashamed of their actions.

Research also shows that surrenderers are not the only ones who experience guilt about euthanizing animals brought to shelters. Euthanasia appears to arouse among shelter workers various emotions that would indicate guilty feelings. A number of studies, for example, have found that euthanizing animals causes stress for many shelter workers (Cochran, 1989; White & Shawhan, 1996) because they feel a conflict between caring for and killing animals (Arluke, 1991; Arluke, 1994). More specifically, this research documents that euthanizing healthy animals violates an ideal conception held by many workers regarding the proper treatment of animals. A nagging inner reproach has led some shelter workers to deny or conceal the practice of euthanasia to outsiders. According to Henry (1973), these feelings are indicators of guilt.

This study began with the finding that the prospect of euthanasia creates guilty feelings for both surrenderers and shelter workers. Rather than further documenting the guilt of these actors, this article focuses on understanding how they cope with it. Strategies used to diffuse this guilt are important in understanding how the relinquishment-euthanasia cycle is perpetuated. Companion animals, given up by people who have a sense of attachment or duty to them, continually arrive at shelters. There, many of the companion animals will be euthanized by people who also care about their welfare. Surrenderers and shelter workers will continue this cycle as long as they can cope with their emotions about the deaths they cause. To the extent that both parties experience guilt in this situation, understanding how they manage this emotion is essential to unpacking the relinquishment-euthanasia cycle and allowing concerned individuals to discuss and debate it.

### **Research Site and Methods**

In order to understand how surrenderers and shelter workers cope with the guilt of euthanasia, an ethnographic study was conducted of a full-service shelter serving a major, northeastern city and its surrounding areas. This shelter received nearly 7,000 animals in 1995, the majority of whom were cats and dogs. Of the animals received, 2,195 were adopted, and, following a holding period, 2,422 were

euthanized. The rest, if not dead on arrival, were either returned to their owners, sent to the city's animal control facility, or euthanized immediately at an owner's request. In 1995, the shelter achieved an adoption rate of 52.7% for cats and dogs.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with surrenderers and shelter workers. Informal and semi-structured, the interviews allowed interviewees to direct the conversations and recount stories of their experiences. Interviews varied in length from 5 to 45 minutes, depending on the interviewees' comfort and willingness to talk. All interviews were tape recorded with permission, and conversations were later transcribed verbatim along with detailed observations.

Eight, paid shelter workers were interviewed, including the shelter manager, animal care supervisor, and the animal caregivers. Staff members were overwhelmingly female (one male) and young (average age in the early 20s). All were high school graduates, and half had college degrees. Volunteers were excluded from this study because they were not directly involved either in selecting animals for euthanasia or for carrying out the euthanasia. Ten surrenderers were also interviewed. Six men and four women, ranging in age from young adulthood to middle age, represented a mix of racial and socioeconomic groups. Half of the interviewees surrendered dogs. The remainder surrendered cats.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to interviews, observations, and informal interactions with shelter staff and surrenderers, shelter staff provided information about the daily operations of the shelter and allowed researchers to enter parts of the shelter closed to the general public. During a seven-month period, researchers visited the shelter at least once a week, occasionally alternating the days on which the visits occurred, in order to observe busier days. Visits usually lasted three to four hours. All in all, the fieldwork involved more than 70 hours of interviewing, observing, and note taking. Research showed that surrenderers and shelter workers experienced guilt over the euthanasia of surrendered animals<sup>3</sup> and managed their guilt by displacing blame. Although both groups relied on the same general coping strategies, some specific techniques for accomplishing displacement were unique to each group.

### **Displacing Blame**

Sociologists have long documented a variety of techniques that people use to protect themselves psychologically when their actions are considered to be immoral, strange, or untoward (Mills, 1940; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sykes & Matza, 1957. To avoid real or anticipated negative attributions of others as well as self recriminations, people seek to present themselves in a favorable light by construct-

ing explanations—excuses, justifications, apologies, and absolutions (Arluke & Hafferty, 1996; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Tavuchis, 1991).

Guilt feelings, in particular, may spur people to construct these accounts as they try to minimize the perceived blame of others and/or self-blame. Forced to manage ensuing guilt, they rely on after-the-fact damage-control tactics or blame-management strategies. Studies of legislators (McGraw, 1991), suicide survivors (Henslin, 1970), and convicted rapists (Scully & Marolla, 1984) have demonstrated the use of blame management as a way to forestall emotional and social injury. In these studies, however, blame management is usually examined as only one of a variety of accounting techniques people use. Nevertheless, in some situations, blame management may be a master accounting scheme that overshadows or excludes other types of accounts in terms of their complexity or effectiveness.

Unfortunately, researchers have not examined guilt-instilling situations, such as the surrender of animals to shelters, where blame-management strategies might be used as a master-accounting scheme. By examining such guilt-instilling situations, a more complete description of the types of blame-management strategies used might come to light.

### *Surrenderers' Approaches*

Although all surrenderers presented superficial reasons for relinquishing their pets, when interviewed more in depth they blamed someone else, passed the buck, or blamed the victim.

*Blaming Others.* To relinquish a pet for any reason was considered the same as to surrender the animal, knowing a high likelihood of euthanasia existed. By refusing to admit that there were alternatives to shelter relinquishment, surrenderers could avoid self-blame. Thus, if animals were to be killed, the fault would lie with those who made the surrenderers give up their pets, not with the surrenderers who had neglected to explore safer options.

Some respondents claimed that they had to relinquish their animals because their landlords did not allow pets. One interviewee told a shelter worker that her landlady would not let her keep [her] pet: "It's either my dog or my house." Other interviewees blamed companions. One surrenderer, for instance, credited his wife with the decision to surrender their dog to the shelter:

She called me at work and says, "You know, you should do it." ... [S]he's the one ... holding the decision. ... So, when she called she said, "Well, you

---

should go and do it,” and I said, “If it’s what you want to do, fine, I’ll do it, but ...”

Also, when displacing blame, surrenderers often pointed to an undefined other or others who failed to take responsibility for companion animals, thereby necessitating their euthanasia. According to one surrenderer, “Nobody wants dogs,” so his hand was forced. Bringing his dog to the shelter, where she was subsequently euthanized, was his only option. Another surrenderer discussed her family’s role as the neighborhood foster family for strays. She and her children regularly took care of homeless animals until new homes for them could be found. She explained her daughter’s frustration over not being able to find a home for the stray she had just surrendered:

[My daughter] gets mad that people get animals and they can’t take care of them and that’s what she gets mad about. But that’s one of the reasons I’ve told her [that] we can’t keep on taking animals, because we can’t keep on worrying about this. It’s not fair to us. So, you know. And I think we’re better off doing it now, ‘cause if I keep it any longer it’s gonna be harder for her.

A woman faulted an adoption agency for not answering her request to find a home for her cat: “Rather than have her put to sleep, I thought they could find a home for her, which I had been trying to do for two months myself. But if the adoption agency had answered me, she never would have got here.”

*Passing the Buck.* Using another strategy for displacing blame over possible euthanasia, surrenderers emphasized their animals’ attractiveness to make sure the shelter workers were at fault if adoptions did not materialize. By building a strong case for their animals’ adoptability, surrenderers could shift blame for euthanasia to the shelter staff who, presumably, failed to adopt out these special animals. To build their case, surrenderers described their animals in appealing terms. When filling out shelter identification cards, they pointed out aspects of their animals’ physical characteristics that set them apart from the other animals in the shelter. One man, for example, distinguished his cats by telling a shelter employee, “They’re kind of unusual because they’re big.” Surrenderers also considered youth a marketable quality that would ensure the adoption of animals. One woman noted, “He’s a puppy, so someone should ... if no one claims him, someone should adopt him, you know. I hear they kill old cats and dogs, but he’s a puppy, he should be okay.”

Other surrenderers would try to endear their animals to the staff by describing their pets' attractive personalities. Comments such as, "She's very playful." "A great dog." or "She's a very caring, loving dog ... a real caring dog," were commonly overheard. One small dog was described as better than a cat: "She doesn't do anything in the house." Her caregiver used the dog's low activity level and unobtrusiveness as a bargaining point. Another woman even threw in the fact that her cats were "free of parasites" and had pleasant personalities. According to her, "They [are] friendly, no fleas, you know—everything. Somebody'll probably adopt them. Nice cats."

Using another device for passing the buck, surrenderers chose shelters that they believed held the greatest likelihood of placement. In their minds, surrenderers could then feel they had done their best to avoid euthanasia by placing their animals' fates into the hands of the shelters most likely to obtain adoptions. A number of surrenderers said that they had chosen the shelter under study because they thought it was highly visible in the general community, had more visitors than other shelters, and, thus, would provide their animals with a better chance of being adopted. One man claimed, "I chose the [shelter] because the [affiliated] hospital is so well known—so the shelter would have more resources for placement." Another surrenderer, asked why she had chosen this particular shelter, replied, "I knew this was more of a safer place to bring her than to bring her to one of those other places that there's more of a chance of her being put to sleep. I think they try harder." One surrenderer described the shelter as "a nice one—it's clean." Another interviewee said that he came to the shelter on his veterinarian's recommendation. He observed, "It's the only place I knew of, 'cause I called the veterinarian and he told me to go to the [shelter]."

Clearly, the surrenderers' perceptions of the shelter and its ability to find adoptive homes for their pets was important in choosing to come to this particular shelter. Whether they based the decision on their own knowledge of and experience with the shelter or on the recommendation of someone they trusted, the choice was made to improve their animals' chances for adoption. Making their animals special on the basis of physical or personality characteristics in a shelter with the most resources seemed to further alleviate the surrenderers' guilt. By assuring themselves that their pets would be adopted, surrenderers could avoid dealing with the guilt of knowing that their relinquishments might, in reality, have caused their pets' deaths.

*Blaming the Victim.* Many surrenderers, considered euthanasia a better solution for their pets than allowing them to live in poor situations. In the surrenderers' eyes,

death was preferable to sacrificing the quality of life that the animal deserved and, indeed, had come to expect. Although animals were not held culpable for these expectations in a strict sense, their needs were nonetheless at the root of this justification. Although humans were also faulted in these justifications, the animals were implicated, as though their presumed needs forced the surrenderers to risk euthanasia.

For example, some surrenderers felt that euthanasia was better for animals than being kept in unacceptable homes, including their own. Presumably, the animals would be neither sufficiently content nor well cared for in such homes. One surrenderer explained that because her kids weren't helping to take care of her pet dog, the possibility of euthanasia was preferable to their neglect. Another man surrendered his dog because she did not receive enough attention in his home. He admitted that he did not want the dog euthanized. When asked if he felt that bringing the dog to the shelter was best for the dog, he responded, "I feel that it is, 'cause she was home alone. I work early and come home late and she's home alone all the time. So I don't think that it's a good idea."

Other surrenderers believed that euthanasia was better for animals than being stray. One woman justified the possible euthanasia of the puppy she had found as a price for keeping him off the street and safe. Another man said that he wouldn't want to take the chance of just letting [an animal] go ... because life as a stray would be worse than death. A woman who had started feeding a stray cat, whom she subsequently relinquished to the shelter, did not want to turn him "back loose in the street." For this woman, dying in the shelter was better for the cat than returning him to his former life.

In several cases, surrenderers considered euthanasia preferable to placing animals in situations where they might put people or other animals in danger. Here, blaming the animal victim is more apparent. In one case, a man surrendered a stray cat that had been living on his property. He explained that the cat had been living under his porch. "Healthwise, it's bad for the children in the neighborhood." In this situation, the surrenderer's main concern about the cat's previous living conditions was for the people who might be harmed. Others also expressed concern for the future treatment of the animals they were surrendering as well as for the human and nonhuman animals who might be harmed. One surrenderer explained about the stray she was relinquishing: "She can't get along with our cats ... she can't get along with our dog. So ... I don't want them to get in a big fight and one of the kids get bitten or anything—trying to break it up—and then she *has* to be put to sleep." Another decided midway through the surrender process to have his dog euthanized immediately rather than placed for adoption. He noted, "I'd rather just put her to

---

sleep, you know, 'cause she's mean. I feel they'll do the humane thing. If I gave her to someone and, you know—God forbid she ever bit someone.” In this man's eyes, the possibility of the dog's being put into a potentially dangerous situation where others could be hurt and the dog neglected or punished outweighed the chance that the dog could find a good home. Surrenderers also worried about retaliation against their dogs. They recognized, for instance, that their dogs would probably end up being euthanized if they bit someone. To euthanize them in the shelter seemed kinder than putting them through a bad experience.

### *Shelter Workers' Approaches*

Like surrenderers, shelter employees displaced blame to lessen or manage the guilt they experienced over killing animals. Shelter employees often blamed surrenderers, tried to instill guilt in surrenderers, and took the moral high ground. Yet, like the surrenderers, they too blamed the victim.

*Blaming Surrenderers.* Most shelter workers' comments about euthanasia were made in the context of their feelings about, and views of, surrenderers. The two were inextricably linked in their minds. Shelter employees considered surrenderers responsible for the deaths of unadopted animals because they were directly responsible for the behavior problems that made the animals inappropriate for adoption or because they had failed to carry out their lifetime responsibility to these animals. As one shelter employee remarked,

If somebody comes in to surrender an animal, I feel like they did something wrong. [This worker feels like saying to surrenderers,] “You failed. You're bringing this thing that you, you know, adopted as a lifelong companion, back to us, and we might have to kill it.”

Another worker narrated an example of a typical, aggravating surrender:

I guess the biggest, all-time aggravating situation that I can think of is somebody who comes in with a cat that is declawed—they just had it declawed, say, a year ago, and now it's peeing all over the carpet. That is one situation, you know, or it's peeing all over the sofa or the furniture or the rugs and it's not using its litter box, or it's getting snitty. It doesn't have the same personality, they say, since before it was declawed. But then, I guess I do get aggravated with those surrenderers because once they realize that now the cat is mutilated and it's behaving badly, probably *because* it's



---

mutilated, they don't ... they just give up on the cat and they bring it to a shelter where we inevitably have to kill it, and ... they're not interested in doing anymore.

In the example above, the shelter worker blamed the surrenderers' actions for the behavior of declawed cats. The declawed cats would have to be euthanized because these relinquishers had caused the intolerable behavior, but then had refused to deal with it and keep them. Another shelter worker reiterated this point, noting that "somebody had failed these animals at some point in their lives" and this was causing their deaths.

Sometimes the shelter workers were very straightforward in placing blame on surrenderers. One shelter employee stated, "Every time I see someone come in, I think, 'God, you know, we might have to put that animal to sleep. You're so irresponsible!'" Another worker said, "I just want them to realize that they were responsible for it." Not only did workers blame the individuals who brought their animals in for having to euthanize them, they also wanted surrenderers to accept the blame. If surrenderers were held responsible for what happened to their animals, shelter workers would not have to feel that the killings were actually their fault.

Another way in which shelter workers blamed surrenderers was by recognizing that most animals in shelters are euthanized simply because there are too many of them and not enough good homes. If this were not the case, shelters might be more like adoption agencies than death row and each relinquishment would seem less like a death sentence for the animal. In this scenario, workers blamed not only the abundance of animals but also the general public for creating the surplus pet population that necessitates euthanasia. Comments such as "I'm mad at whoever it is that's created this problem" and "We're never gonna beat this problem until everybody takes a small amount of responsibility" indicate the shelter workers' frustrations with the public's lack of concern over the killings that shelters are forced to do.

One worker described a particularly agonizing day when all the dogs in the kennel had to be euthanized because of an outbreak of parvovirus, a preventable illness. Her almost desperate need to blame someone for this widespread, senseless death was evident when she noted, "It's situations like that ... [it] gets me angry at people, you know what I mean? Who could have done this? Who could have allowed this to happen?"

*Instilling Guilt.* When surrenderers failed to display the proper guilt or grief over their relinquishments, shelter workers often sought to make them feel guilty. As one

shelter worker said, "I try really hard not to let a person walk out the door without knowing that 'Gee, this could have been corrected.'" By reminding surrenderers that relinquishment was only one of several options, workers placed the responsibility, blame, and guilt on surrenderers. One shelter worker commented, "I don't want to make people feel bad," but it was clear that making surrenderers feel guilty was precisely what she was trying to do. She continued,

Sometimes, I feel like it comes across that way. But I'm not trying to make [them] feel guilty. I'm just trying to let [them] know that as a result of [their] actions, this animal may die. Um, generally when someone says to me, "I don't want you to kill my animal," I say, "Then don't sign that piece of paper [and give] it to me, cause there's a big chance that it's gonna happen." And then they look at me and say, "But what am I supposed to do?" "Well, A-B-C-D-E-F-G. I can give you 20 different things that you could do. If you're not willing to do them, then you're gonna have to accept [it], if your choice is to give me the animal, then you're gonna have to accept that this might happen."

This worker came back to this point later, explaining how she would come across to a surrenderer to whom she had given problem-solving options.

Now you make another choice. Are you definitely going to leave this animal with me or are you going to try to work it out? If you're not going to try to work it out—if you're definitely gonna leave it with me—understand that this might happen.

Another shelter worker's approach to making surrenderers feel guilty was somewhat more passive, choosing not to assuage surrenderers' guilty feelings. As she said, "If they come in and act like this is a bag of trash that they want to hand me ... I tend to be much shorter with them and, um, much less consoling, you know?" One worker noted that she was not intentionally rough on surrenderers, but recognized that she could come across that way. As she explained, "I don't ever try to be mean but, God, I would walk out of there feeling like, maybe I could have tried something else. Maybe I—I *should* have tried something else."

*Taking the Moral High Ground.* By blaming surrenderers, shelter workers set themselves apart from and above those who surrendered animals to them. In a sense, they took the moral high ground, claiming that they would never make the kinds of mistakes or decisions that people who surrender animals to them make

---

regularly (Weaver, 1986). By insisting that they would never break their lifelong commitment to their own animals, they separated themselves from the group of people who were actually responsible for the need to kill animals placed in shelters.

In fact, workers were quite aware of using this strategy. One shelter worker admitted that she did this at the beginning of her career but implied that she had softened over time as she encountered more surrenderers.

When I started working here, I think I was pretty much the typical self-righteous, I-know-everything-about-animals [type] and [felt that] none of my animals would ever end up in a shelter, and [that] these people [surrendering animals] must be ignorant *and* uncaring both at the same time.

Another worker expressed frustration over a situation that she could not fathom touching her own life:

And, you know what I mean? Moving—moving as a reason. Well, jeeze, you know what I mean? I've moved three times with two cats and two dogs. How is it that I can manage to find an apartment that allows animals, but [they] can't?

This shelter worker would consider moving to a new home only if she could take her pets. Another shelter employee made the same assessment of her commitment to her pets, swearing,

I would never move anywhere without my animals. I would protect them, you know. I would do anything I could for them. I have five animals at home that I have to take care of on a daily basis and—and damn it all—they'll never be in a shelter. I don't care if I'm sleeping in—in [the street] tomorrow—my dogs will be sleeping next to me.

Claiming the moral high ground also enabled shelter workers to judge the actions of surrenderers and conclude that they had neither tried hard enough to solve their problems nor to care properly for their animals. One shelter worker spoke for her colleagues when she said, "It aggravates us when we think they haven't put the effort into taking care of their animals to make it work, when it's obvious that they can." Another employee elaborated this view:

People have really simple problems or, you know, that are more annoyances than problems, with their animals, and they just don't examine their

situation and solve it before they come to us. And then they come to us as if the world has collapsed and they're frustrated beyond belief, when all it is, is [that] they need to come home and walk the dog first before they sit down and watch the news, or so it's having a piddle accident, you know, and it's really basic things that are easily solved and they're not willing to do it.

By viewing the surrenderers' problems as minor and solvable and depicting them as stubborn and uncaring, shelter workers emphasized the wrongdoing of surrenderers who relinquished pets. Magnifying this wrongdoing made workers seem all the more kind and helpful, particularly considering the people they helped. This served not only to reverse the workers' guilt but also to commend them for the job.

*Blaming the Victim.* Shelter workers, like surrenderers, coped with euthanasia by viewing it as necessary for the animals' sakes, a better alternative to a bad quality of life or painful death. Every time I kill an animal," a worker remarked, "I think to myself, 'What a shame, what a shame. This is so unfair.' But, thank God it wasn't getting smushed by a car, or getting shot in the head, or whatever could have happened." Another worker, almost as graphic in describing the possible horrors an animal could meet outside the shelter, said, "It's better, you know. I have to realize that it's better than what a lot of people would do: leave it or, you know, drown it or something. You know," she continued, "people drown cats". By assuming that the animals would meet a worse fate as a stray or with uncaring people, shelter workers enabled themselves to view euthanasia as merciful. By viewing killing as an act of mercy, shelter workers absolved themselves of their guilt.

A related strategy considered animals' deaths both ongoing and inevitable. Shelter workers resolved their guilt by seeing that the animals were slowly dying in the shelter—euthanasia served merely as an earlier endpoint to eventual death. One shelter worker accomplished this, even putting a positive spin on her participation, by viewing the deaths of the animals in her shelter as a process that she just helps along.

And I'm not actually killing the animal. I'm just giving it an injection. I'm just helping the process speed up. It—I really feel that most of these animals are dying as we speak. Um, sitting in those cages, the kennel stress that goes on, the frustration ... the fear, loneliness, and boredom. I mean, I—I can't call it living. Um, so by euthanasia, I think that we're only helping the process along. It's already started, long before we decided to.

This outlook made euthanasia a morally neutral action, if not an act of kindness, in the minds of the shelter staff. By stripping euthanasia of its negative connotation, shelter workers reduced their own feelings of guilt about killing.

## **Discussion**

Surrenderers and shelter workers were bound by a common concern for animals taken to shelters. Both groups were very concerned about the euthanasia of valued animals, experienced guilt over it, and used the same general strategy to mitigate their guilt—namely; both groups refused to accept blame for euthanasia. That these groups resorted to blame-reducing strategies is not surprising. However, what is interesting is that they appeared to patch together an intricate web of these strategies and made their defenses in tandem, each group unaware of the depth or complexity of the other's perspectives.

There were also some novel aspects to their blame-management strategies. First, surrenderers and shelter workers resorted to blaming the victim (Ryan, 1976) by pointing to problems with animals that justified their euthanasia. Unlike conventional victim blaming, however, which faults individuals rather than the social systems creating the problems, both surrenderers and shelter workers had a sophisticated view of the problem. In their views, society at large is at fault for the need to euthanize some animals because society created the pet overpopulation problem.

Second, previous studies of guilt-mitigating techniques have demonstrated that, in order to reduce responsibility for particular acts, individuals commonly diffuse blame in a guilt hierarchy by attributing the major responsibility for their acts to others, yet feeling some degree of blame (Henslin, 1970). In this study, surrenderers and shelter workers appeared to accept no blame and externalized all responsibility for euthanasia. In short, they placed virtually all the blame on others. This reaction was similar to that found in an organizational chain-of-command where people blame perceived or actual wrongdoing on those having uttermost authority (Vaughan & Sjöberg, 1970). The blame-management process in this study, however, did not rely on an organizational chain of command. Shelter workers did not blame their supervisors, and surrenderers had no organization to blame. Yet, like the organizational dissipation of responsibility by those lower in the hierarchy, both surrenderers and shelter workers attributed the full responsibility for euthanasia to other individuals or to society at large.

These findings contribute to our understanding of both sides of the shelter blame-game. By resorting to a host of blame-management strategies, both groups

---

avoided personal responsibility for the problem and failed to construct a common ground for promoting communication between them. Yet it is this very communication that could stop the cycle of surrender and euthanasia. Shelter managers and administrators can improve the effectiveness of staff members' interactions with the public by curbing certain guilt-producing strategies that alienate the public. To make surrenderers feel guilty or otherwise offended only serves the workers' short-term purpose of relieving their own guilt and stress and makes it less likely that they will listen to educational approaches by shelters or other humane groups.

To make shelter workers more aware of surrenderers' feelings of guilt may improve the morale of shelter staff, helping them to recognize that many surrenderers are not callous and uncaring toward animals. Also, shelter workers may feel less alone in their concern for animals. By being sensitive to surrenderers' guilt and loss, shelter workers may feel more willing to converse with them and provide the supportive, educational experience that could improve the surrenderers' opinion of the humane community and help them to make better decisions regarding future pet ownership.

The humane community, as a whole, may benefit from understanding the guilt that surrenderers experience as they relinquish their companion animals. Such understanding helps those who look for ways to implement both public awareness and educational programs that promote responsible pet ownership. Knowing why people surrender pets may be helpful in determining ways to prevent the problems that underlie relinquishment. Understanding how people manage their feelings once they have decided to surrender an animal, however, may be just as important. After all, in many cases, the why can be solved. Pet owners can learn how to train cats not to destroy furniture, individuals can look for apartments that allow pets, and professional dog walkers can take a puppy out during the middle of the day until he or she is housebroken—simple solutions to common pet problems. Yet these problems are reasons why caregivers surrender companion animals to shelters.

Information about surrenderers' coping strategies can be invaluable in the design of future educational efforts to make pet owners think more seriously before they relinquish their pets. Making the public aware that youth does not guarantee an animal's adoption may result in an owner's considering the reality of a pet's future before deciding to surrender that companion animal. It may also inspire people to think more carefully about the long-term commitment needed to care properly for pets. These are important and useful tools to promote the humane community's ultimate mission of improving companion animal welfare through responsible pet ownership and public awareness.

---

## Notes

1. Correspondence should be addressed to Stephanie S. Frommer, MSPCA, 350 S. Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02130.
2. No differences were found between surrenderers of dogs and cats in terms of guilt experienced or strategies used to manage it. It is possible that these differences were not apparent because only a small number of surrenderers were studied. If larger samples can be obtained, examining differences between surrenderers of different species may be a useful and interesting goal for future research.
3. What is particularly interesting about shelter workers' and surrenderers' comments about euthanasia is that the topic arose often in interviews even though respondents were never directly asked about it. Direct questions only focused on their feelings about surrendering.

## References

- Arkow, P. S. & Dow, S. (1984). The ties that do not bind: A study of the human-animal bonds that fail. In R. K. Anderson, B. L. Hart, & L. A. Hart (Eds.), *The pet connection: Its influence on our health and quality of life* (pp. 348-354). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Arluke, A. (1991). Coping with euthanasia: A case study of shelter culture. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 198, 1176-1180.
- Arluke, A. (1994). Managing emotions in an animal shelter. In A. Manning & J. Serpell (Eds.), *Animals and society: Changing perspectives* (pp. 145-165). London: Routledge.
- Arluke, A. & Hafferty, F. (1996). From apprehension to fascination with dog lab: The use of absolutions by medical students. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25, 201-225.
- Cochran, C. D. (1989). A study of job-related stress at Halifax Humane Society of Volusia County, Inc. Unpublished manuscript, Stetson University, Department of Psychology.
- DiGiacomo, N., Arluke, A., & Patronek, G. (1998). Surrendering pets to shelters: The Relinquishers perspective. *Anthrozoös*, 11, 41-51.
- Dorr Research Corporation. (1994). *A marketing research study of people/pet relationships that have ended*. Boston: Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
- Henry, J. (1973). *On sham, vulnerability, and other forms of self-destruction*. New York: Vintage.
- Henslin, J. (1970). Guilt and guilt neutralization: Response and adjustment to suicide. In J. Douglas (Ed.), *Deviance and respectability* (pp. 192-228). New York: Basic Books.
- Hewitt, J. & Stokes, R. (1975). Disclaimers. *American Sociological Review*, 40, 1-11.
- McGraw, K. (1991). An exploratory test of the effects of political accounts. *American Political Science Review*, 85, 1133-1157.

- McNicholas, J. & Collis, G. M. (1995). The end of a relationship: Coping with pet loss. In I. Robinson (Ed.), *The Waltham book of human-animal interaction: Benefits and responsibilities of pet ownership* (pp. 127-143). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Mills, C. W. (1940). Situated actions and vocabularies of motives. *American Sociological Review*, 5, 904-913.
- Nassar, R., Talbot, J., & Moulton, C. (1992). *Animal shelter reporting study: 1990*. Englewood: American Humane Association.
- Patronek, G. J. (1995). Development and evaluation of an ecological model for describing the pet dog population in the United States and an epidemiologic study of risk factors for an owner's failure to retain their dog as a pet in the home. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, Indiana.
- Patronek, G. J., & Glickman, L. T. (1994). Development of a model for estimating the size and dynamics of the pet dog population. *Anthrozoös*, 7, 25-41.
- Patronek, G. J., Glickman, L. T., & Moyer, M. R. (1995). Population dynamics and the risk of euthanasia for dogs in an animal shelter. *Anthrozoös*, 8, 31-43.
- Patronek, G. J. & Rowan, A. N. (1995). Determining dog and cat numbers and population dynamics. *Anthrozoös*, 8, 199-205.
- Rowan, A. N. (1992). Shelters and pet overpopulation: A statistical black hole. *Anthrozoös*, 5, 140-143.
- Ryan, W. (1976). *Blaming the victim*. New York: Vintage.
- Scott, M. & Lyman, S. (1968). Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 33, 46-62.
- Scully, D. & Marolla, J. (1984). Convicted rapists' vocabulary of motives: Excuses and justifications. *Social Problems*, 31, 530-544.
- Sykes, G. & Matza, D. (1995). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22, 664-670.
- Tavuchis, N. (1991). *Mea culpa: A sociology of apology and reconciliation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Vaughan, T. & Sjöberg, G. (1970). The social construction of legal doctrine: The case of Adolf Eichmann. In J. Douglas (Ed.), *Deviance and respectability* (pp. 160-191). New York: Basic Books.
- Weaver, R. (1986). The politics of blame avoidance. *Journal of Public Policy*, 6, 371-398.
- White, D. J. & Shawhan, R. (1996). Emotional responses of animal shelter workers to euthanasia. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 208, 846-849.