

# For pets' sake, save yourself! Motivating emergency and disaster preparedness through relations of animal guardianship

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## ABSTRACT

Animal ownership and animal attachment have been considered risk factors for surviving emergencies and disasters. However, there is reason to believe that pet guardianship and animal attachment could be reconfigured from risk factor to protective factor. This is because animal guardianship provides access to a number of social networks and communication channels that can be used to disseminate information. However, information alone is insufficient to drive action. This paper refines the 'pet as protective factor' proposal by detailing three inter-related influences that might be compelling in the transformation of intention to action. These are motivation (relevant and irrelevant), risk perception (likelihood and consequence of risk), and duty (as a form of responsibility to specific others, or a form of moral obligation). The actions of a guardian will not only affect an animal's emergency and natural disaster survivability, but their ability to continue in the co-dependent relationship of guardianship in which they are invested. A consideration of these influences reveals an additional dimension to the 'pet as protective factor' proposal. While it could be used to motivate people to save their pets 'for pets' sake' (and hopefully save themselves in the process), it could also convince people to save themselves for their pet's sake, and hopefully save their pets in the process.

## Introduction

In emergency situations and disasters, people are faced with confronting decisions under unforgiving pressures. The relationships that guardians have with pets and animals are put to the test in these circumstances. Some animals are abandoned – willingly or unwillingly

(RSPCA QLD 2013, RSPCA QLD 2012). Sometimes this is with good reason or done with the animal's interests in mind, such as when communities assume that welfare organisations will attend to their animals in the recovery phase of a disaster. When animal guardians evacuate under duress or without preparation, they exacerbate demands on evacuation centres, emergency services, recovery services, and animal rescue and welfare organisations. When they risk their lives to save an animal by failing to evacuate (Heath *et al.* 2001, Heath, Voeks & Glickman 2001), returning prematurely to rescue their animals or saving unknown animals (Coates 1999) they also endanger the lives of others (Irvine 2006). This includes a whole network of family, friends, neighbours, and responders—even the animals they are attempting to save. In all these scenarios, people and animals can and do die (Thompson 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that this literature on animals and disasters characterises animals, animal ownership and animal attachment as risk factors for the survival of humans in emergencies.

There is reason to believe that pet guardianship and animal attachment could be reconfigured from risk factor to protective factor (Thompson 2013). The 'pet as protective factor' proposition is neither trivial nor esoteric. At least one pet can be found in approximately two thirds of households in Australia and other developed countries like the US (ACAC 2006, Leonard & Scammon 2007). There is also a significant number of non-owners whose emergency preparedness might also be motivated by animals. As many as one in four Australians have 'semi-owned a cat at some point in time' (Sharp & Hartnett 2009). With 91 per cent of pet owners in Australia reporting feeling 'very close' to their pet (ACAC 2010: 73), there is perhaps greater risk in not helping people save animals (Thompson *et al.* 2014).

## Pet as protective factor, pet as preparedness motivator

To be a protective factor, people's desire to save their pets needs to motivate emergency preparedness actions. The populations most likely to benefit from this proposition are animal guardians who are unlikely to take preparatory action for the explicit purpose of saving themselves (perhaps due to apathy, pessimism or fatalism), or who are not responsible for other

human lives. This benefit arises because animal guardianship provides access to a number of social networks and communication channels that can be used to disseminate information. These channels include newsletters for pet-related groups, veterinary notice boards, dog obedience groups, council pet registration renewal forms, etc. (Thompson *et al.* 2014). However, information alone is insufficient to drive action (Gielen & Sleet 2003). Multiple theories have been developed to understand three levels of impact on behaviour. The first 'intrapersonal' level relates largely to psycho-cultural factors such as knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs and motivation. The second 'interpersonal' level accounts for social relations, and the third 'community' level institutional or sociological factors (Glanz & Rimer, cited Gielen & Sleet 2003).

Animal attachment can influence human emergency preparation and response behaviours at all three levels. For example, people value animals and especially the role that pets play in their lives. They are attached to animals and are motivated to save them (Thompson *et al.* 2014). These intrapersonal factors have serious consequences for behaviour. They can result in a drive to save animal life that exacerbates (Heath, Voeks & Glickman 2001, Heath *et al.* 2001, Coates 1999) or mitigates (Thompson 2013, Thompson *et al.* 2014) the risk of injury or death during emergencies and natural disasters. The impact of animal attachment on human behaviour is clear at the intrapersonal level. Theories about animals as embodied extended human selves (Belk 1996, 1988) or projected self-objects (Brown 2007) make it possible to construct desires to save animals as synonymous with desires to save oneself. They also contend that social relations are not exclusive to humans. Humans form meaningful interspecies social relations with animals akin to other interpersonal social relations. Moreover, human relations with animals often implicate other humans such as veterinarians, first responders or animal rescuers. Finally, their animal-related networks can even extend to the community level where they participate in common interest groups (real or virtual).

Health promotion has been particularly concerned with theories articulating how humans transform intentions into actions. A 1991 initiative sought to reduce HIV infection by involving leading theorists in a review of behaviour change theories. Across five dominant theories eight factors were determined to 'account for most of the variation in health-related behaviours. These were intentions, environmental barriers, skills, outcome expectancies (or attitude), social norms, self-standards, emotional reactions, and self-efficacy' (Gielen & Sleet 2003).

However, these are insufficient for action. Developing and rehearsing a written bushfire action plan is a case in point. A person might not have written or initiated any action to write a bushfire action plan despite intending to write a plan, having nothing preventing them from writing a plan, having the skills necessary to write a plan, believing that having a plan will increase their survival, living and working amongst other people who have a written plan, seeing themselves as a planner, thinking that writing a plan is a good thing

to do, and being confident in their ability to write a plan. As stated in New South Wales Rural Fire Service campaigns, 'planning to make a plan is not a plan'.

In addition to the eight factors being insufficient to create action, their application to behaviour involving human-animal relations complicates the concept of self-efficacy, being 'one's confidence in one's ability to perform a specific behaviour'. Self-efficacy of an animal owner involves confidence in achieving a behaviour in association with an animal. While someone may feel capable of evacuating their home without an animal, they may not feel capable of locating their cat for successful co-evacuation. Moreover, one's self-efficacy may involve the perceived efficacy of an animal. The cat owner who perceives her cat as having no natural fire-sense is more likely to risk her life to save it than the owner who perceives her cat as having an innate ability to survive.

Nonetheless, these caveats for understanding the impact of human-animal relations on self-efficacy reveal three inter-related influences that might be more compelling in the transformation of intention to action; motivation (relevant and irrelevant), risk perception (likelihood and consequence of risk), and duty (as a form of responsibility to specific others, or a form of moral obligation).

At the outset of the 'pet as protective factor' proposal (Thompson *et al.* 2014, Thompson 2013), the focus was on leveraging people's desire to save their animals and pets to encourage them to undertake natural disaster preparedness activities (cleaning gutters, writing and rehearsing a bushfire action plan, making an evacuation plan, purchasing pet carriers, etc) for the overt purpose of saving their animals and pets with the concomitant effect of increasing human chances of survival. This mechanism of the 'pets as protective factor' proposal addresses motivation ('Do you want your pet to live?') and risk perception ('Are you aware that your animal is at risk and could die?'). In other words, 'I am motivated to save my pets, I think the likelihood of a fire happening and killing them is high (therefore I am going to take actions that increase their survival)'.

However, the 'pets as protective factor' proposal can do more than this. It's not just about motivating people to save their animals and pets 'for pets' sake', and hopefully saving themselves in the process. It is also about convincing people to save themselves for their pet's sake, and hopefully saving their pets in the process. The 'pet as protective factor' proposal uses social responsibility to motivate action. Most animal guardians feel a social responsibility to their animals in the same way as parents do for their children. In fact, many pets and domestic animals are like perpetual infants, never reaching a level of independence required to save their own lives. They cannot, for example, unchain themselves or open the front door when a fire front hits their homes.

## Who depends on you?

Public Education Coordinator for the Everett Office of Emergency Management, Mary Schoenfeldt, took

advantage of the fact that many people take their social responsibility more serious than their personal responsibility. She instigated the 'Who Depends On You? Are You Prepared For Disasters?' (WDOY) campaign in Snohomish County, Washington, USA. It resulted in posters asking people to think about who depends on them, or who is counting on them in a disaster. The posters used images of people with their human and animal families. Although 'the 2009–2010 WDOY campaign did not create a dramatic increase in preparedness behavior across Snohomish County respondents ... [p]et owners that were familiar with WDOY were more likely to have extra supplies and an emergency plan' (Green *et al.* 2010). Campaign evaluators recommended including 'simple and clear directions on ways to prepare' (i.e. skills and self-efficacy), as well as '[c]ommunity-based social marketing techniques, which emphasize small steps, commitments, and incentives' (Green *et al.* 2010). The social responsibility appeal underpinning WDOY can be seen in campaigns promoting anti-smoking, safe working practices, and safe driving that focus on the impacts of death and illness on loved ones, and other 'fear appeals' (Williams 2012).

The WDOY approach extends the 'pets as protective factor' proposal by broadening its application. 'Owned' animals are entangled in a relationship of dependency, or guardianship, with humans. Indeed, many traditional definitions of 'domestication' emphasise the ways in which human control over the movements, breeding, and feeding of animals increases their vulnerability and dependence upon humans. Recognising the mutual dependence of humans and animals within recently identified processes of co-domestication (Fijn 2011) only reinforces the fact that many pets and animals are, if not *a priori* dependent on humans (through years of selective breeding and domestication), are inculcated in relations of dependence, or (expressed more favourably) relations of guardianship.

The actions of a guardian will not only affect an animal's emergency and natural disaster survivability, but their ability to continue in the co-dependent relationship of guardianship in which they have been recruited. That is, not only do guardians have a duty to ensure their animal's survival of a disaster, they have a duty to ensure their own survival so they can honour the co-dependent relation of guardianship into which their pets were 'involuntarily' recruited and thereby maintain their responsibility to continue to provide care. In short, the relational contract of guardianship charges guardians with the duty to ensure they and their animals survive an emergency.

## Discussion

There is considerable potential for the 'pets as protective factor' proposal to be used to activate a sense of what might be called 'guardian's duty' or 'guardian's promise' in recognising, accepting and reciprocating the fact that animals and pets rely and are dependent on their owners or guardians. It is then the duty of others (such as emergency services community engagers) to support animal guardians

by providing or facilitating access to the information, skills, acceptance and capacity necessary to fulfil this contract of guardianship.

In the immediacy of an emergency, if guardians can be encouraged to evacuate themselves and their animals early and independently, demands on evacuation centres and emergency services should decrease. For farmers whose livestock herds are too large to evacuate, there needs to be a focus on property preparation, engagement with the latest fire science, and continuous and objective re-evaluation of self-efficacy as they or their partners age (Smith, Taylor & Thompson 2015).

Increasing the survival of pets and animals could also reduce pressure on health and counselling services and support rebuilding during the phase of recovery and rebuilding follow a natural disaster. While the emotional impact of the loss of human life is widely acknowledged, the loss of animals can also result in significant grief and psychological trauma (Lowe *et al.* 2009). When animal loss occurs alongside a traumatic event such as a disaster, the impact can be overwhelming (Zottarelli 2010). In the case of a natural disaster, humans often experience 'post-disaster distress' (Lowe *et al.* 2009), especially following 'enforced abandonment' (Hunt, Al-Awadi & Johnson 2008) of animals or feelings of blame for not having made the necessary precautions for the life of their animal. They may also experience disenfranchised feelings of guilt over animal loss, relative to human losses (Cordaro 2012).

This trauma is not specific to relations with individualised, domestic, companion animals. Farmers can also experience psychological trauma from the loss of livestock (Hall *et al.* 2004, Irvine 2009, Chur-Hansen 2010). Therefore, helping people to save animals is relevant not only to emergency planning and survival but to recovery and rebuilding in the days, weeks, months and years after the event. In light of this, it might be worthwhile asking animal guardians 'do you realise how much your animals depend on you to survive and recover from a disaster, and – for pets' sake – what are you going to do about it?'

## Conclusion

This paper has extended earlier work on the 'pets as protective factor' proposal by recognising its two-pronged approach to motivating emergency preparedness and survival. First, it motivates people to make the recommended preparations for the explicit purpose of saving animal lives. Second, and as underlined by the 'Who Depends on You?' campaign in the US, it can motivate animal guardians to make the recommended emergency preparations for the explicit purpose of saving their own lives. However, both rely on the desire to save – and exercise a duty of care for – animals. Those with no desire or opportunity to care for an animal might be similarly motivated by being encouraged to think about the humans and animals that might depend on them in the aftermath of an emergency – even if they consider themselves presently disenfranchised from social networks.

The 'pets as protective factor' proposal is far from a panacea. Further research is needed to determine how to effectively incorporate it into behaviour change campaigns by activating motivation, risk perception and duty of care. It is highly likely to be fortified by other elements of behaviour change, such as positive reinforcement and reward for adequately preparing for something that may never occur. The contextual application of the proposal in combination with other behaviour change factors therefore requires empirical research. In the absence of an elegant antonym for 'dependent' in a relationship of dependency, there is also a need for research to identify the terminology that most resonates with animal owners and inspires a duty of care rather than seeks compliance. 'Responsibility' might be too austere, 'obligation' might be too onerous, 'duty' a little too earnest, and 'prerogative' a reinforcement for less than ideal states of preparation.

Finally, animals are clearly important for motivating emergency preparedness actions by their guardians. The fact that those actions can increase human safety suggests that animals should also be recognised as human guardians. Animals, therefore, cannot be excluded from matters of human safety during emergencies.

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