**Exploring the Loss and Disenfranchised Grief of Animal Care Workers.**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the psychological distress of Animal Care Workers (ACWs), and the disenfranchisement of this distress through a mixed methods study conducted as an online survey in which 139 participants responded about their experiences as an ACW, related psychological distress, and the systemic disenfranchisement of distress. Findings indicate that nearly half of ACWs experienced symptoms of depression in the previous month. Over 66% indicated it was difficult to cope. Limited support often resulted in disenfranchised loss. Implications suggest ACW distress and disenfranchisement related to animals they serve is similar to that of individuals who lose animal companions.

**Introduction**

Animal care workers (ACWs) are those who work or volunteer for animal care organizations (ACOs), such as veterinarians and those employed at animal shelters, zoos, aquariums, and private animal care organizations. For this paper, ACW will also refer to those who may not directly work with animals such as administrative staff at an animal shelter. Researchers have shown high levels of anxiety, depression, psychological distress, suicidal thoughts and suicidal attempts amongst veterinarians and animal control workers (Bartram, Yadegarfar & Baldwin, 2009; Tiesman et. al., 2015; Nett et al., 2014), and have illustrated the role in which they are expected to manage the guilt and grief of euthanasia amongst their clients despite their own emotional experience (Morris, 2012). There is a research gap in both the experiences of ACWs in capacities other than veterinarians and animal control workers (e.g., staff at an animal shelter) and addressing whether disenfranchisement is a factor in the psychological distress of ACWs.

It is difficult to understand the impact of the relationship between ACWs and the animals they serve without empirically-validated literature about this relationship. Researchers have, however, considered the way in which people perceive the relationship and subsequent loss of animal companions. An animal companion, as used throughout this paper, is a non-human being (usually dogs and cats, but not exclusively) that is owned by a human who willingly provides the animal with the necessities of life. In an attempt to study the nature of the relationship between ACWs and the animals they serve with empirical validity, the animal companion relationship was explored. This provides an understanding of what relationships with animals mean from a human perspective.

The relationship between people and their companion animals is one marked by a bond held sacred, an obligation to protect and give voice to the voiceless, a reciprocal form of comfort and mental health satisfaction (Maharaj et al., 2016), and simultaneous feelings of caring for another while being cared for (Margolies, 1999). The loss of these sacred bonds can also be devastating and create long-lasting grief reactions exacerbated by a disenfranchisement of that grief (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Hart et al., 1990; O’Donovan, 1997, as cited in Morley & Fook, 2005; Packman, et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2004).

When relationships with the animals they serve are lost through animal euthanasia, adoption, the termination of employment, the transferring of departments or the loss associated with leaving the animals unsupervised overnight, ACWs may experience loss/grief reactions and the disenfranchisement of those reactions through mechanisms similar to the experience of owners of companion animals. This paper explored the questions: 1) Do ACWs experience socioemotional consequences related to animal care work and 2) Is there disenfranchisement of these experiences. The research presented denotes the intersection of animal rights, the right to heal from suffering, and mental health awareness.

**Exploring the Experiences of Animal Care Workers**

**The Significance of Animal Companions**

Pet owners often express that their relationship with their animal companion represents a mirroring of our remarkable ability to connect with other species that share our world (Maharaj et al., 2016; Charles, 2014). Human relationships with their companion animal provides a sense of duty, feelings of obligation to protect and provide for creatures that do not have voices of their own, provides mindful interactions leading to increased self-esteem and connectedness, provide comfort in times of grief, and led to developing stronger relationships with self, family and other people in our lives (Maharaj et al., 2016; Jackson-Grossblat et al.., 2016). Companion animals provide a sense of security without a threat of abandonment, particularly useful for people with attachment issues (Morely & Fook, 2005), and allow a simultaneous sense of caring for another while feeling cared for (Margolies, 1999).

The loss of such a sacred relationship can be devastating. Pet owners facing the loss of a companion animal often experience numbness, disbelief, ruminations about the death experience and circumstances around the loss; and some experience anxiety, depression, anger, and self-reproach (Archer & Winchester, 1994). Importantly, because bonds between pet owners and animal companions are often experienced as representations of human relationships, much of the loss response is similar to grief reactions experienced by the loss of any loved one, human or animal (Hart et al., 1990; O’Donovan, 1997, as cited in Morley & Fook, 2005).

Empirical understanding of the relationships ACWs form with the animals in their care does not exist. There will be aspects of the research presented here that address this. However, the understanding of pet owners and their relationships with companion animals provides researchers with a fundamental understanding of bonds between ACWs and the animals in their care. There is, thus, an empirical assumption that ACWs form bonds to the animals in their care similar to animal companions and their owners, and understanding the specific losses ACWs experience may help guide an understanding of specific mechanisms that result in grief responses.

**Euthanasia in America**

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), approximately 7.6 million companion animals enter animal shelters every year and approximately 2.7 million of these animals are euthanized, while the same number are adopted out (ASPCA, 2016). This number is not fully accurate. First, it does not account for all shelters across the United States, as there is no existing government body established for collecting accurate counts on this data. Additionally, these numbers are only representative of dogs and cats; there are a far greater number of species that interact with systems throughout the animal care industry. Lastly, this number does not account for veterinarians who euthanize pets privately at the owner’s request.

What this number does ultimately show, however, is that there are countless ACWs who interact with, and potentially form bonds with, at least 7.6 million animals entering their care. Of this number, around a third of animals are euthanized (ASPCA, 2016). Applying the discussion above on the sacred relationship between companion animals and their caregivers, and the effects of loss on those caregivers, there is a concern that these losses can be devastating to the ACWs who care for these animals. Though there may be an implied higher investment for pet companions than animals in ACW care, it may be possible to show that these losses ACWs experience are equally devastating, and even worse are repeated, prolonged, and unending.

**Losses Beyond Animal Euthanasia**

Some researchers have also explored animal losses experienced outside of death. For example, Walsh (2009) writes on the ambiguous loss experienced by owners of absent or missing animals: the forced separation of animals through nursing home admittance, animals going to permanent housing in foster care situations, owners moving into housing with anti-pet policies, and grief experienced through the compounding of other losses. These experiences foster unique forms of grief reactions.

Likewise, it is important to note that ACWs may experience grief reactions through the adoption of animals in their care, relocation of animals to other agencies or departments, the termination of services in certain circumstances (such as ACWs working for private ACOs), and animal-related employment or volunteer termination. ACWs may experience guilt when leaving the animals in their care alone when the worker leaves for the day. Grief reactions to these unique experiences may influence and ultimately compound euthanasia-related loss experiences. This is an important factor when understanding ACW reaction to losses throughout the research presented here. Participants in this research were not asked about specific losses experienced through their work as an ACW, and understanding that loss experiences are diverse amongst participants provides a framework on the importance in this paper of the post-loss reaction and how that is experienced.

**Disenfranchised Grief**

Strongly associated with the grief faced by pet loss is disenfranchisement from loved ones (Packman et al., 2014), and a sense that societal norms do not permit expression of grief concerning the loss of a pet (Hall et al., 2004). This disenfranchisement can lead to complicated or unresolved grief (Cordaro, 2012), can intensify underlying psychopathology (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006), and is a denial of the basic human right of grieving (Attig, 2004). Often, mourners of pet loss feel as though their usual support systems will not properly acknowledge the grieving of the pet, creating further isolation in mourning (Dunn et al., 2016).

Attig (2004) articulates disenfranchised grief as a failure of grieving in the following domains: empathic failure, political failure, and ethical failure. Empathic failure is the fundamental failure of understanding why the griever is grieving, and ultimately represents a failure to understand the gravity of the mourning and how it impacts the lives of its victims. Political failure examines what Attig describes as an “abuse of authority” (p. 202), where entities and/or systems choose for the mourner in a way that limits options in grieving, control expressions of grief, or sanction the efforts to overcome suffering. In the case of this research, political failure is represented by an ACO which does not recognize the suffering of its employees. Ethical failure examines the fundamentally disrespectful ways in which disenfranchised grievers are treated. Disrespect, in Attig’s articulation, concerns ways in which disenfranchised grievers are ultimately constrained from seeking relief from suffering, and are not allowed to contend with and subsequently find meaning in their suffering.

**Manifestations of Grief and Disenfranchisement**

In October of 2014, the Huffington Post published a blog post entitled “The Legacy and Tragedy of the life of Dr. Sophia Yin.” The article starts, “On Sunday, Sept. 28, Dr. Sophia Yin, one of the world’s most respected and important veterinary behaviorists, committed suicide” (Grossman, 2014, para. 1). The article discusses the prevalence of depression amongst what the author describes as, “the animal-training and veterinary community.” It was among the first times popular media has acknowledged a trend which the community itself has known intuitively for years.

Empirical researchers are catching on to the trend, as well. Bartram and colleagues (2009) found that, when compared to the general population, veterinary surgeons in the UK had high levels of anxiety, depression, poor working conditions through unfavorable demands and low levels of managerial support, less positive mental well-being, and increased rates of negative home-work interactions. Most disturbing, however, was their significant finding that veterinary surgeons were 5.5 times as likely than the general population to experience suicidal thoughts. A 2015 study by Tiesman, et al., looked at suicide in U.S. workplaces between 2003-2010. Animal control workers, employees of what is often called the “city pound” or animal shelter had a suicide rate 3.5 times higher than that of the overall U.S. worker population. Additionally, a report from the Centers for Disease Control showed that 6.8-10.9% of 10,254 currently employed participant veterinarians were experiencing serious psychological distress, 24.5-36.7% reported experiencing depressive episodes, 14.4%-19.1% reported suicidal ideation, while 1.1-1.4% made suicide attempts (Nett et al., 2014).

Attention has been focused on veterinarians and a few other specific ACW populations, such as animal control workers, but researchers have failed to address other populations of ACWs, such as shelter staff. Additionally, few researchers have looked at the processes that facilitate suicidal ideations, only the outcome of completed suicide or suicidal ideation itself. The research presented here contributes to a broader understanding of the mental health needs of ACWs by exploring the questions: 1) Do ACWs experience socioemotional consequences related to animal care work? and 2) Is there disenfranchisement of these experiences? Again, the focus of this research represents the intersection of animal rights, the right to heal from suffering, and mental health awareness.

**Methodology**

Due to a lack of research on a wider ACW population, this is an exploratory study to describe and understand the specific loss reactions that occur amongst ACWs and the disenfranchisement of those loss reactions by varying systems within the lives of ACWs. An online quantitative survey was designed with questions relating to: 1) basic demographics; 2) qualifying employing organizational data; 3) assessment of emotional experiences in their role as an ACW; 4) perceptions of support systems within their lives; 5) mental health needs and 6) reception towards the utilization of a structured support group. These questions were designed to uncover preliminary concepts on the stressors ACWs face relating to their work, and how systems in their lives, including the ACO of which the work, support or hinder healing. The section of the survey relating to perceptions of the utilization of a support group for ACWs is meant to provide insight into feasibility of such an intervention to ameliorate the stressors of the job for ACWs. A qualitative question follows to elicit participants’ perception of the utilization of a structured support group. The survey was created within university-supported software package called Qualtrics. A link was provided in all the recruitment efforts to the survey in Qualtrics which at the end created a SPSS file for data analysis. The analysis was descriptive in nature focusing on frequencies of responses. Two of the authors coded the qualitative responses on the attendance of a proposed support group. Comparison of themes were made across participants who would attend a support group, those who would not attend, and those who were not sure. Discussion took place between the two coders until agreement was achieved. The themes were then quantified by prevalence within these three groups. Participants’ quotes were used to analyze the themes.

The survey was open to anyone who identified as an ACW described in marketing materials as an employee of, or regular volunteer for, any ACO. Participation in the survey was anonymous and the research was approved by the Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board. Researchers began receiving survey results in April 2016, and the survey was kept active until December of 2016, though aggressive recruitment ended in May 2016. Participants were recruited mainly through snowball sampling, through social media blurbs which appeared on the primary investigator’s own social media pages, and through posting on the social media pages of ACOs. Individual ACOs were contacted with a printable flyer and invited to post it in employee spaces. Additionally, community leaders in the animal care industry were contacted to assist in recruitment. These leaders were invited to publicize the survey through social interactions, and post digital and paper copies of the flyer for the survey.

**Results**

\*Insert Table 1 here\*

These recruitment efforts produced a total of 168 surveys. After eliminating 29 surveys that were not fully completed, the final sample size was 139 respondents. The overwhelming majority of participants were white females across a wide age range (see Table 1). The most common ACO-type of affiliation was no-kill shelter, followed by veterinary practices and, lastly, open admission shelters, meaning shelters that euthanize for behavioral or physical health concerns. Participation was not limited to those who interact directly with animals, but as expected, most participants do work in that capacity. Participants were fairly even spread across length of time in employment. Approximately half of the participants identified themselves as animal attendants (those who spent the majority of their time at work interacting with animals), followed by nearly a third in administrative roles (those who were in more managerial an administrative positions).

The next section presents the results of the participants’ emotional experiences as an ACW, their support systems to deal with these experiences, and openness to support groups at their organization as a method to cope with loss. The questions utilized in the survey for these results are highlighted in Table 2 and Table 3. The total Ns are reported in the tables where missing data occurs.

\*Insert Table 2 \*

**Loss Reactions among ACWs**

Most participants experienced negative emotional states working with animals and faced difficulty in handling these feelings; some with troublesome issues indicating the need for professional assistance (see Table 2). Nearly half of participants (51.1%, *N=71)* reported that, over the last month, they have had several days where they experienced feelings of depression or hopelessness; over a fourth (29.5%, *N=41*) experienced this more than half the days or nearly every day. Participants expressed similar feelings of being tired and having little energy. Almost all participants think about the animals in their care even during non-working hours (93.5%, *N =130*). The majority stated that their work with animals sometimes makes it difficult for them at home or work (53.2%, *N = 50*) and coping with their feelings (66.2%, *N = 92*). When an animal leaves their care, ACWs sometimes (47.5%, *N = 66*) experience similar feelings to a human loss, and nearly a quarter (22.3%, *N = 31*) often or always feel similarly. The majority of participants (61.2%, *N=82)* stated that negative feelings were triggered through incidents experienced at their ACO. Triggered incidents were self-defined by the participants. For those who think of the animals outside of work, one-third (36.1%, N=48) feel that their thoughts turn into extreme rumination or obsession.

\*Insert Table 3\*

**The Disenfranchisement of ACW Loss Experience**

A lack of organizational support to address these negative feelings was perceived by the ACWs (see Table 3). Over two-thirds (69.8%, N=87) reported that their organization never or only sometimes advocates for their well-being, recognizes the difficulties of working as an ACW (54.6%, *N=76);* supports them in general (46.0%, *N=64*); or validates their voice in matters (44.6%, *N = 52*). Unfortunately, the ACWs also lack internal strength to find support; 59 percent (*N=82*) reported that they never or sometimes have the ability to find mental health resources when need be. Another indicator of the stress level is that nearly one-quarter (24.6%, *N = 34*) often or always feel the need to look for other employment.

Despite depressive symptoms and feelings of dissociation towards the ACOs where they work, the majority of participants (94.3%, *N*=131) still feel that they have often or always done the best they can for the animals in their care, and many participants (84.1%, *N*=116) believed that the organization for which they work often or always does the best it can to provide resources to the animals in their care. Additionally, despite the majority experiencing feelings of fatigue and depression, many participants (81.7%, *N*=112) reported that they often or always feel motivated to do their best work at their ACOs. This may indicate motivation beyond pay, a sense of duty ACWs may feel towards the animals in their care.

\*Insert Table 4 \*

Family, friends and co-workers are sources of support outside of management at the ACO (see Table 4). Discussing ACW-related losses with others was not difficult for 40.9% (N = 56) of the participants, somewhat difficult (41.6%, *N = 57*) for others, while only 17.5% (*N = 24*) stated that it is very or extremely difficult. Similarly, most participants often or always feel they have someone to talk to about work difficulties (54/9%, *N = 72*) and feel like talking to ACWs to help cope with work difficulties (53.1%, *N = 69*). However, the majority (62.3%, *N = 81*) reported they never or only sometimes feel that they have enough opportunity to speak with other ACWs. Being able to speak to others in the field is important since most ACWs feel that people in their personal life never or only sometimes empathize with their work difficulties at the ACO (64.2%, *N = 84*) or disregard the difficult feelings they face dealing with loss and stress (61.8%, *N = 81*).

\*Insert Table 5\*

A possible solution of a support group to deal with feelings of loss, depression and anxiety was posed to the participants (see Table 5). Over half of participants (56.5, *N=73*) reported that they may benefit from the use of a support group for ACWs. A majority (60.0%, *N=78)* reported that this group of like-minded people in the industry may improve feelings of depression, anxiety, and/or ruminations, and many (47.3%, *N=61*) reported that such a group may improve their social wellbeing. Fewer participants felt the group would be able to improve feelings toward their employer (26.4%, *N = 34*). The ability of such a group to help improve feelings toward employers Though many participants (43.4%, *N=59*) said that they would attend if such a support were created, a close percentage (40.4%, *N=55*) said that they were not sure and a few (16.2%, N = 22) stated outright they would not attend. An open-ended question followed requesting the reasons behind their response regarding attendance. A total of 90 participants responded to this question. Themes were compared between the those who would attend, not attend, or were not sure.

\*Insert Table 6\*

A support group was posed to the participants as a solution to relieve stress, depression, and other negative feelings resulting from carrying out their ACW responsibilities. Themes for why they would, would not, or were not sure if they would attend such a group can be found in Table 6. Most participants who **would attend** a support group are those who clearly stated the need for a supportive place and their own peers in attendance. Responses included “people who understand the frustration and disappointments in hits work” and “it is difficult to talk about work-related with people not in the field”. One participant stated, “It’s difficult to explain my feelings to my husband who has never worked in a field like this”. Examples of general support included ‘it is always good to vent”, “there’s something more personal about speaking about it rather than allowing it to continue to build”, and “for support, understanding, and to improve our work”. A few were ambivalent but willing to attend i.e. “I would at least check it out and see what it was all about” and “I would attend to see if it was helpful”. A few were experiencing more distress than others and stated, “I could gauge my mental state and would have a ready outlet to address any recognized or developing concerns” and “I am very concerned about burning out and not being able to keep doing it”. For those who **would not attend** a support group, most felt they either were not the type of person to attend a support group because of personal characteristics or their personal style of handing stress. Personal characteristics included “never been a fan of sharing or opening up”, “I’m not a joiner”, or “I’m shy”. Handling stress on their own included “I deal with this stuff fine on my own” or “I leave my work at work”. A few participants have other support systems in place i.e. “I find and seek support from my husband and very close friends” and “I have a support system that allows me to vent/talk about my job.” A few prefer “guidance from a professional” or “one-on-one is better for me personally”. While it was expected that logistical difficulties would be the response of those who would not attend, this did not occur. Instead, it was the overwhelming response for those who were **not sure to attend**, i.e. “clocking 65 hours a week”, “I am so busy”, “I like the idea, but I work 7 days a week, so I don’t know if I’d have the time”, and “barely enough time to do my day job, my second job, and volunteer regularly at the shelter”. Like those who would not attend, this uncertain group has support systems (“I already have informal gatherings of this sort with mentors and former classmates”), misconceptions of support group dynamics (“I can see it turning into a giant gripe session without any real conclusions”), and do not see themselves as a support group person (‘social anxiety, and the fear of making feelings of loss/sadness worse” and “I am not a social creature”). Other common responses for the uncertain group were concerns abut bringing different divisions together i.e. “I may attend a group of veterinarians, but I would have little in common with a group of kennel staff and other animal care workers” and not needing a group because it would be unnecessary i.e. “Since I am in administration, I’m not sure if I would be impacted as much as an animal caretaker” or “I practice good self-care, sleeping, eating, exercising, and meditating”.

A genuine interest for a support group was expressed by many participants who see its value especially with their own peers in attendance. For others, more education on the structure, purpose, and execution of support groups might encourage attendance. In addition, for many participants, the logistics of support groups will have to be carefully planned to fit their schedules or else it remains a major barrier for those who may want to seek support.

**Discussion**

**Experiences of Loss**

The findings here support the concern that ACWs face stress-inducing losses associated with working at an ACO. This is evidenced through participants’ reports of depression and fatigue within the last month and ruminating thoughts about animals for which they care (see Table 2). This is also illustrated through participants’ comments that losses of animals in their care feel similar to the loss of a human friend. Though further research should look at the exact nature of the relationships between ACWs and the animals in their care, this data gives support to the conclusion that this relationship has features similar to that of caregivers and their animal companions (Maharaj et al., 2016).

Caregivers have a sense of duty towards their companion animals and feel an obligation to protect and provide for creatures that do not have voice of their own (Maharaj et al., 2016). Similarly, despite feelings of depression, ruminations, and difficulties in grieving the losses of animals in their care, participants still felt that they are motivated to do their best to provide for the animals in their care. ACWs may seek employment with ACOs because of prior history and interest as well as love towards animals, which may facilitate a process to developing invested relationships with animals in their care.

**Disenfranchisement of ACW Loss**

The losses and grief reactions experienced by ACWs are disenfranchised at multi-systematic levels per Attig’s (2004) articulation of disenfranchisement. A key finding was that ACWs report lack of empathy from social networks about difficulties of their work, and the difficulties ACWs face in articulating their experiences. This provides evidence of empathic failure from those whom ACWs typically see as support systems. Further research is needed to examine the processes associated with this empathic failure.

Participants reported a lack of: support, recognition of their challenges, and advocacy for mental wellbeing from the ACO for which they work. This absence of organizational awareness and response is a form of political disenfranchisement. Qualitative answers regarding potential utilization of a support group provides additional insight. For example, one participant wrote, “There are people whom I would not feel comfortable discussing emotional challenges with [from] other departments.” This may imply a lack of communication between departments at varying levels of the organizational hierarchy. An administrator made the comment that an ACW support group could turn into “a giant gripe session without any real conclusions.” Additionally, it is important to note the significance of those reporting administrative positions leaned towards feeling *always* supported by the ACO where they work, whereas those reporting animal attendant positions leaned towards *neve*r feeling supported. Though these latter findings lacked statistically significant numbers, it does support the implication of a mentality from ACOs in general that, at the very least does not recognize, or at worst, completely ignores ACW suffering.

Participants reported that ACOs fail to advocate for the well-being of ACWs, and many participants reported an inability to find mental health services, which indicate an ethical failure. This implies a disrespect towards the healing process that may impact the quality of work done by ACWs, and has an overall impact on mental well-being. As one participate noted, this work “can wreak havoc on your soul.” Another wrote, “…this area [mental health services] in animal care is extremely neglected.” Another wrote, “It’s nice to know that I’m not the only one to feel burned out or compassion-fatigued.” This suggests that there is something about the culture of ACOs that isolates the suffering of ACWs, which can cause further complications for healing. Because the issues explored in this paper indicate a *group need* for support, there as implication that a *group response* is needed to address healing.

**Implications**

**Structured Support Group**

Research exploring the creation of a positive support system within workplace settings has shown that this can increase the satisfaction of work-life balance and foster positive mental health outcomes (Bhave et al, 2010). The benefits of a structured support group have been shown in other vocations, such as police officers (Patterson & Talesco, 2009), and in other populations that experience grief and loss (Knight, 2009). Additionally, Dunn et al. ( 2005) reported positive results from a support group for victims of pet loss. Participants in this group reported feelings of gratefulness for having support to fill empathetic voids. Support groups for specific populations can often help members find meaning in the losses they experience. This meaning is a vital step in the mourning process (Murray, 2001; Goldsworthy, 2005).

The formation of a support group for ACWs may find similar success. Many participants endorse the idea. One participant wrote that it is needed “…for support and understanding and to improve our work.” Another, “I feel peer support is very necessary because rarely do people outside the profession understand the difficulties and emotions of the job.” Disenfranchised loss with animals is a currently underaddressed area. ACWs have not had the opportunity to develop a common language in this area, benefit from sharing coping strategies that might be specific for this type of work, nor give and receive support from each other.

**Working with ACOs and Community Networks**

Given the findings here, it is important for ACWs to have discussions with ACOs, perhaps with mental health professionals acting as mediators in the conversation, to figure out solutions to ensure employees and volunteers receive the support that is urgently needed. In obtaining cooperation from ACOs, researchers should investigate how mental well-being may impact employment and volunteer retention, particularly given that many participants reported that they at least sometimes feel the need to look for other employment opportunities (56.3%, *N=98*). Research should also look at the impact on worker productivity, particularly given that many participants reported frequent feelings of fatigue, which may manifest in sick leave.

Healing through community involvement and community empowerment is another avenue in which ACWs may find meaning in their losses (Eugenia et al., 2013; Murray, 2001). This could include connecting ACWs with animal rights activists, environmental activists, or other professions that have found value in addressing the emotional impact of their professional work. Though this may be beneficial despite ACO involvement and cooperation, healing may be most productive when more stakeholders are involved.

**Limitations**

This research has several limitations. Researchers used a convenience snowball sampling technique. Because researchers did not have a sampling frame to enlist participants, researchers were reliant on employees in the animal care industry, as well as animal care organizations, to enlist their own community members to participate in this survey. This technique creates questionable representation quality; however, it is suitable in the exploratory nature of this study. The survey itself has not been tested for validity or reliability. Thus, results from this survey may not necessarily represent the truest mental health assessment needed for ACWs. Because most marketing was also completed online, there may have been limitations of who would have actually been exposed to the survey’s existence. Furthermore, this study does not account for extraneous variables that may influence the mental well-being of participants. It cannot be concluded, thus, that these results are impacted by other stressors in the participants’ lives. There were some participants who started, but did not finish the survey in its entirety (*N=*37). It is not possible to speculate why they did not complete the survey, thus, creating a possible non-respondent bias. Lastly, this may have limited responses to ACWs who, for whatever circumstance, already understand the mental health needs among ACWs, or may be more impacted by these needs. Those who do not experience these needs in the same way, or at all, may have been disinterested in this survey, and thus, it may not be representative of the ACW population as a whole

The demographics of this survey may ultimately skew its results in unforeseeable ways. For example, 89.2% of participants were female and 94.2% were white, where other studies have shown 60% response rates from female ACWs (Huntley, et al., 2016; Lily, et al., 2014), and racial identity has not typically been explored. Thus, these numbers may not represent the diversity in the field. Lastly, ACWs are targeted as a homogeneous population, whereas particular ACWs probably experience losses in varying levels of severity and frequencies. For example, workers at open-admission animal shelters will experience euthanasia of animals in their care at greater frequencies than workers at no-kill shelters, where ACWs at private ACOs probably do not experience euthanasia at all.

**Conclusion**

Though there are limitations to the research presented here, it does provide an initial framework in understanding how ACWs experience their careers at ACOs. Through building relationships with the animals in their care, ACWs suffer grief reactions when these relationships come to an end. This grief is disenfranchised through the empathic failures of usual support systems in their lives, political failures through institutional denial, and ethical failures in that ACWs are not permitted to process their losses (Attig, 2004). Further research is needed to understand the relational processes of ACWs with the animals in their care, the consequences of the losses of these relationships on ACW well-being, and to gain a better understanding on disenfranchisement or failure to mourn these losses.

Interventions should focus on providing support for ACWs to process their losses without judgement. This may include structured support groups for ACWs in general, or specific ACWs such as veterinarians, and connecting ACWs with animal rights, environmental and labor activists who may help ACWs understand how to make meaning out of the losses they experience, vital in the healing process of loss, and to gain a sense of community empowerment (Murray, 2001; Goldsworthy, 2005).

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