



BRILL

SOCIETY & ANIMALS 28 (2020) 151-170

Animals
& Society
Institute
brill.com/soan

Exploring Empathy, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout among Feral Cat Caregivers

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Abstract

Based on four years of ethnographic observations, interviews, and full participation, this research elucidates the emotional dynamics and consequences of feral cat caregiving across a variety of interactional settings. Such caregiving is often conducted in the context of a lack of understanding from otherwise sympathetic friends and relatives and opposition and stigmatization from others who are unsympathetic to the work. We find that the ability of caregivers to take the role of the nonhuman other facilitates genuine empathic concern, which allows caregivers to provide relatively successful and ongoing care. Unfortunately, the combination of emotional stress and compassion fatigue, combined with frequent setbacks and a substantial dearth of organizational and economic support of caregivers' efforts, often leads to disillusionment, cynicism, and burnout. In addition to elucidating the social and emotional problems of our respondents, we also offer a conceptual and theoretical framework to guide further research on this and related topics.

Keywords

human-animal studies – emotion – empathy – compassion fatigue – burnout – role-taking – feral cats – caregivers – caretakers

This research explores the emotional lives of feral cat rescuers and caregivers. Although caregiving is always difficult, those whose efforts are focused on humans or companion animals are seen as doing legitimate work, even when their care benefits members of problematized groups. However, those who care for feral or free-roaming cats routinely face open disapproval and harassment by others who associate their work with such negative stereotypes as hoarders and crazy cat ladies (Thompson, 2012). Providing care for feral cats is also isolating and exhausting because many caregivers rarely have a day or night of respite from their responsibilities. Their persistent commitment is motivated by a genuine empathetic concern for the wellbeing of cats, as well as the fact that they typically find the actual caregiving rewarding. Nevertheless, it occasionally becomes traumatic when, for example, individual cats or entire colonies are threatened by disease or are displaced or attacked by humans.

In confronting such opposition, caregivers often are overcome by negative emotions, both from and toward others, as they struggle to manage the effects of stigmatization and stress related to care. As a result, they must frequently engage in emotion work (Hochschild, 1979), both individually and collectively. For the individual, that typically involves the suppression of negative emotions in order to persist in the face of loss, failure, and direct hostility. Collectively, other caregivers, sympathetic friends, and family members often are needed to help guide stressed individuals toward the cognitive processing necessary to evoke or focus on more positive feelings, or to more positively frame negative emotions (Hochschild, 1990).

Those caregivers who belong to or associate with feral cat rescue groups, or work cooperatively with companion animal rescue organizations, often receive emotional support from other group members. However, at times stress and negative emotions associated with feral cat work can be exacerbated by intra-group conflicts that erupt within those dynamic and sometimes fragile coalitions. Thus, emotional and physical stress combined with a lack of economic resources or organized support mechanisms can lead to compassion fatigue and ultimately to caregiver burnout.

The research presented here documents and elucidates the emotional dynamics and the consequences of such caregiving experiences across a variety of interactional contexts. Through the process of studying the individual experiences and shared meanings of feral cat rescuers and colony caretakers, we uncover the common perceptions, emotions, problems, and adaptations of those individuals, some of which are shared with those involved in other forms of caregiving and some of which are unique to those focused on feral cats. Lastly, based on this and previous research, we introduce a preliminary inductively-derived model for understanding the complex and interconnected

processes involved in caregiver stress, fatigue, and burnout. This ethnographic research, and the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that emerges from it, address an important and understudied domain of nonhuman animal rescue and welfare work: the often-stigmatized care for marginalized animals who face immense suffering when denied such care.

Materials and Methods

Our research is grounded in thousands of hours of ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the past 14 years as a result of participation in multiple forms of animal rescue work across a variety of groups and communities in a large metropolitan area. This project relies on information gathered from 2013-2017 via field interviews, email and listserv exchanges, and observation of and informal interactions with cat caregivers and rescuers, most of whom are involved in TNR (Trap Neuter Return/Release) projects and the management of TNR colonies. Ethnographers who have worked in a variety of environments have heralded participatory approaches for facilitating integration into communities, achieving local knowledge, reducing suspicion, gaining trust, and avoiding misinterpretation by developing a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of participants (Wall, 2008; Emerson, 1981; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

As a result of caretaking of colonies, work with feral cat advocacy groups, and interaction with a diverse community of cat rescuers, our research has the advantage of producing both broad and thick descriptions of this subculture and the social dynamics of its members. As full participants, we have achieved a deep understanding of the challenges faced by caretakers in their everyday lives. Much of what we present constitutes “unprompted data” (Wall, 2008, p. 145), which emerged as we worked, interacted, and talked openly with other caregivers during routine caregiving activities, group meetings, and email and listserv exchanges.

The analysis presented here relies on the experiences of volunteers affiliated with: (1) a city-wide TNR organization whose mission is to educate the public, teach TNR methods, and assist individual citizens and neighborhoods with TNR projects; (2) a small group of employees who established and manage a TNR colony at their place of work; and (3) a neighborhood-based cat and dog rescue group with a heavy emphasis on the socialization and adoption of TNR cats. We routinely communicated with approximately 50 members of these groups and conducted field interviews with 21 intensely active informants. We also gathered information from many caretakers who operate outside of these

groups but who occasionally work with the groups in order to facilitate the care for their own colony cats.

The types of experiences described in the quoted material that follows were typical of an overwhelming portion of the rescuers with whom we have interacted and conducted interviews. Our observations were analyzed by a form of the constant comparative method through which initial comparisons of cases (experiences) were followed by a gradual transition to comparisons of cases with emergent and established theoretical concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1996). For example, the concepts of continuous-care stress, peripheral stress, and stigmatized-care fatigue, which are discussed below, were not brought to the analysis. Rather, they emerged directly from reading back through and comparing the comments from our interviews and informal conversations with our informants, as well as the experiences they shared in group internet conversations.

This project was guided by the goal of transparency. We were open about our identities as human-animal researchers, and all respondents in this study knew about and in fact sometimes relied upon and referred to our roles as academic researchers. All who are quoted here granted permission for their comments to be included. Nevertheless, to protect that anonymity of participants, the actual names of individuals, colony cats, TNR groups, and specific locations do not appear in this work. A proposal describing the methods of the research was submitted for institutional review and approved as being in compliance with the Code of Federal Regulations pertaining to Protection of Human Subjects.

Development and Roles of Empathy and Empathetic Concern

The term compassion fatigue has been defined as the “mental weariness resulting from exertion” to relieve the “emotional and physical pain of others” and characteristically results in a reduced capacity for being empathetic (Figley & Roop, 2006, p. 11). It also has been associated with a plethora of psychological symptoms, including but not limited to emotional exhaustion, depression, cynicism, resentment of others, feelings of helplessness, and loss of hope (Mathieu, 2012). As articulated by the psychotherapist Figley (1995), compassion fatigue is the cost of caring, resulting from the significant emotional investment in helping those who suffer; it is “a function of bearing witness to the suffering of others” (Figley & Roop, 2002, p. 1435). Even before the onset of compassion fatigue, persistent exposure to such suffering can produce compassion stress, which is also rooted in an internal “demand to be compassionate and

effective in helping” (Figley & Roop, 2006, p. 11). Although certain interventions can be successful, caregivers who lack the personal and/or institutional resources needed to mitigate compassion stress are especially susceptible to compassion fatigue.

Although early research on compassion fatigue linked it to the symptomatology of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), researchers argued that due to its post-secondary or vicarious nature, the path to compassion fatigue was different, as it begins with an empathetic response to the suffering of another (Figley, 2002). This response often results from voluntary engagement with the victim in order to reduce suffering through empathic understanding. Such understanding creates both cognitive and emotional bonds between those providing and those receiving care, which enhances empathy and solidifies the caregiver’s commitment to the welfare of the other. With specific emphasis on human-nonhuman animal relationships, Shapiro (1989) uses the concept of kinesthetic empathy to describe a phenomenological method through which human researchers can gain empathetic understanding of other animals. We have observed that some animal caretakers also employ elements of this method as part of their effort to understand the care situation from the perspective of the nonhuman recipient.

From a symbolic-interactionist perspective, empathy is considered one of the role-taking emotions, the experience of which requires the ability to imagine the situation from the perspective of the other (Schott, 1979). However, the study of human efforts to take the role of the nonhuman other is a relatively recent development. According to Mead (1934), role-taking is essentially a cognitive process involving awareness, observation, and logic through which one is able to induce the mental states of the other for the pragmatic purpose of constructing one’s own responses. Such cognitive role-taking allows one to sufficiently align one’s thinking with that of the other in order to imagine what the other is thinking, but by itself does not allow one to feel what the other is feeling (Enright & Lapsley, 1980). More recent work, however, has focused on affective role taking, whereby the individual is able to not only imagine what the other is thinking but also to imagine what the other is feeling (Shott, 1979; Clark, 1997; Ruusuvauro, 2005).

Unfortunately, rather than being an automatic response, role-taking is a process that requires applying a “skill sequence” that allows the individual to cognize certain attributes of the other, such as their needs, intentions and thoughts, as well as their “emotional, perceptual or intellectual capacities and limitations” (Flavell et al., 1968, p. 5). In the context of intensive caregiving, the commitment to providing quality care motivates the often-difficult work necessary to develop relevant role-taking skills. Indeed, the combination of

cognitive and emotional role-taking skills is vital to the provision of quality care for feral cats who, by both experience and nature, are aloof from and suspicious of most humans. As one of our respondents described the commitment required to understand such cautious creatures:

There's a cat named Benny, and it's taken me five years to get Benny within two feet of me feeding him.... He's one of those cats that, that I think of a lot, when it's really hot, and maybe he has fleas and he feels bad, and he's really, maybe, thirsty instead of hungry, but he wants whatever it is I'm bringing, and he'll get closer.

Unfortunately, if imagining what the other is feeling goes no further than recognizing the emotional state of the other or considering how one would feel if one were in the place of the other, the observer will not be able to truly share the emotional experience of the other (Enright & Lapsley, 1980). Perhaps this is why hunters can expend significant effort in trying to understand the minds of their prey in order to track, call, and ultimately kill them (Yates, 2009). Thus, it appears that the combination of cognitive and affective role-taking is not sufficient for the emergence of empathetic concern, unless it is paired with an empathy-fueled selfless regard for another's wellbeing (Davis, 1983).

This suggests that true empathetic concern is the state of perceiving a situation from the perspective of the other; feeling empathy toward the other in that situation; and having genuine concern for the wellbeing of other, which reflects that empathy (cf., Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009). The commitment to care that emerges from empathetic concern allows caretakers to succeed, even when dealing with such reclusive and cautious individuals as feral cats. Committed caretakers can and do learn through persistent efforts to understand the actions and feelings of individual felines from their perspective, and through such understanding, they are able to provide a level of care that is gratifying to both the caregiver and care receiver. As one veteran caregiver explains it:

I understand the kinds of places he likes to be. He's the kind of cat who likes to be under a building. He was probably born under a building. He likes to be under things. There are places he could get shelter, but those aren't the places that he likes. He wants to be inside, hidden, and so he's going to look for a house. He's gonna look for an opening under a building. He's gonna look for a closed-in area. And I know that about him ... I attribute his old age as a feral cat, which the average age of a feral cat without care would be two to four years on their own, with care like seven to eight years, and this old

guy's thirteen years old, maybe even older ... I attribute his survival to the fact that we have a relationship.

Based on our observations and discussions with numerous caretakers, we would suggest that true empathic concern is a cornerstone of any care orientation. Unfortunately, such concern can also be a source of stress and fatigue for caregivers.

Stressors Leading to Compassion Fatigue

Despite caregivers' best efforts to persevere in their caregiving efforts, via role-taking and empathetic involvement, their work frequently faces severe obstacles and results in minimal progress or failure, each of which produces residues of negative emotional energy. When combined with the perceived demand to maintain their emotional commitment in order to succeed, such negative energy produces compassion stress. The following comment from a caregiver reveals the stress that resulted from her failure to connect with and develop an understanding of a particular cat who appeared in the territory where she cares for multiple colonies of cats.

No matter how hard I tried, this young cat—couldn't have been more than 10 months or a year max—would not allow me to create a stable feeding spot with her so that I could eventually TNR her ... I worried myself sick over this kitty—kept returning to all of the places where I had fed her to see if she was around, but she wasn't. I kept that up for at least four months and even now every time I drive by the last spot where I fed her, I sink inside wondering what happened to that little one. My husband thinks I am crazy for obsessing about her, but I can't help it.

Over the long term, negative outcomes occur repeatedly, and in the absence of mechanisms for mitigating the impacts of compassion stress, caregivers can develop compassion fatigue. Fortunately, organizations associated with professional caregivers—such as nurses, social workers, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and therapists—typically offer institutional and organizational resources, including counseling, to assist those routinely exposed to compassion stress in order to prevent compassion fatigue. Such resources, however, are rarely if ever available to those involved in caregiving of nonhuman animals on the borders of cultural concern or respectability. In addition to the compassion stress that emerges directly from animal care-giving efforts, our

research reveals two other forms of stress that contribute to compassion fatigue: peripheral stress and continuous-care stress.

Peripheral stress does not result directly from care of or interaction with feral cats or other care workers. Rather, it is the result of the actions of other humans who do not understand or are unsympathetic or overtly hostile to caregivers' efforts. Such individuals, who reside on the periphery of actual care work, include those who actively oppose TNR work, co-workers who consider it a nuisance, and otherwise supportive friends and family members who simply do not understand or easily tolerate the level of commitment caregivers demonstrate. Because cat rescuers and caregivers frequently communicate with each other in order to coordinate their efforts, they routinely share information about interactions with such individuals, especially those who actively oppose TNR and/or hate or cause harm to feral cats.

Such stories can be both informative and occasionally cathartic. However, some are a source of additional stress, such as accounts of cats being intentionally poisoned, shot, and/or mutilated. Two such incidents described below created stress for many of the caregivers in our study. The first created severe stress among caregivers in the area where the incidents occurred and eventually led to a national feral cat group's involvement. That incident was recounted in an email by a caregiver who worked closely with a woman who found two mutilated cats.

Someone in my neighborhood ... is killing and mutilating cats. An elderly neighbor came out and found a kitten impaled on his picket fence a week or so ago. Another mutilated cat was found today. The police and [named national animal welfare organization] are investigating. Does anyone have any ideas to help find the perpetrators?

The second incident was recounted in a separate group email.

As many of you know, we have been helping TNR, foster, and relocate a colony of abandoned cats in the [named neighborhood]. Over the last week, two outside cats ... have been viciously killed, inside fenced yards. Last night we saw security tape of the second killing and confirmed that one of two large dogs who had been roaming the neighborhood together was the killer. Viewing that tape was very distressing.... The sheriff wouldn't come out last night, and certainly animal control would put them down if they pick them up. Does anyone know of a rescue that takes dogs in this situation? ... I followed these dogs for nearly an hour last night as they went up and down every street, into back yards, onto porches, and every small animal outside is in danger as long as they are loose. This is terrifying ... I hate to see any

animal put down when there is the possibility of a better outcome, but I just am not seeing it at this point.

The victimization of cats, whether by other species or anti-cat people, is a routine source of peripheral stress, but care workers sometimes find it just as stressful to deal with other cat caregivers whom they assume to be sympathetic, but who instead make their caregiving more difficult. The following email exchange between active TNR group members illustrates the emotional complexity, frustration and stress that can occur when working with other feral cat caregivers who ideally should be allies.

Volunteer 1: Does anyone know what brought about [x's] sudden departure from [group name]? I get the feeling that she has become offended in some way. She served [group name] so well and for so long, this comes as a shock to me.

Volunteer 2: Yes ... it was my email response to her last night asking her to stop sending me personal emails requesting that I perform even more volunteer tasks than I already do ... I feel continually asking others to do even more, often comes from a lack of appreciation for what others are already doing.... I think individuals that feel guilty if they can't handle everything someone else suggests they do, which I often feel, are easy to manipulate into doing too much by others. I felt it was time to address this issue between us. She doesn't seem to have appreciated my emailed request that she stop, or my explanation of what I felt was going on emotionally between us....

Volunteer 3: Wow, you must have really upset her to make her quit.

Within several months of this exchange, two of the three volunteers involved also resigned from the group in response to conflicts over a lack of volunteers to deal with an overwhelming number of TNR and kitten foster requests that had come in via the group's website.

Sadly, a third form of peripheral stress comes from an unlikely source: friends and family, most of whom want to be supportive but may indirectly or directly express concerns over the caretaker's level of commitment to the cats or resentment over the time and personal resources they devote to animal care activities. Even care workers with supportive families and friends often feel the stress of guilt over not being able to do more with and for the humans they care most about, because of their animal care commitments. As a result, many caretakers deemphasize or even try to hide their caretaking activities from friends and colleagues in order to avoid unnecessary conflict, as the following comment illustrates.

In those days, I would have a negative experience weekly [at work], and so much so that I created a whole feeding schedule late at night.... That became a habit for me because I just really avoided people, because there was a 50/50 chance that the interaction would be horrible.... A colleague, who knew me for years, verbally accosted me in a parking lot and told me to stop feeding....

Although caregivers must tolerate and work to repress frustration and anger prompted by verbal attacks from incredulous colleagues, the anxiety resulting from those encounters pales in comparison to the guilt they carry from the stress their work can impose on the humans they love. The following interview comment indicates the desperation caretakers often feel as a result of this form of peripheral stress.

But when I think about rescue in general in my home life, it's intense, because bringing cats into your house that are wild, to recoup them on your porch.... Our house has our own cats in it, and so the only place that isn't Catville is [my husband's] office ... and he's very tolerant of this, but when I'm showing cats to people who are possible adopters, when I'm quarantining a cat from the colony, when I've got a kitten who I've caught, when I've got a cat that's sick in the middle of the heat of the summer or in the freezing cold of the winter, they have to go in his office. And that, then, disrupts his work, which is his life.... Yeah, when I think about my home life and cat rescue, it's a heaviness mostly....

Another cat caregiver expressed her sadness over the discord her cat work was causing in her relationship.

I have spent so much on cats this month that [my boyfriend] is furious with me, and says no more or he moves out. I get it, I understand, but don't know what to do. Can someone in your group please help with this poor momma and her little kittens behind [restaurant name], I just can't do it right now. Please!!!!

In addition to peripheral stress, our observations reveal another form of stress that is quite common among those intensively involved in ongoing animal care. What we shall refer to as continuous-care stress describes care work that is conducted on a continuous, that is, daily, basis in a cultural environment that provides an excess of impediments relative to resources. One of the

contributors to higher levels of such stress among animal-care workers than among professional human-care workers is their very frequent and “ongoing exposure to trauma and suffering” (Figley & Roop, 2006, p. 48).

For example, the sheer volume of injured, suffering, and ultimately euthanized dogs and cats brought into some kill shelters on a daily basis is often overwhelming to those who work there. Such exposure is associated with a subjectively experienced state of physiological and psychological strain resulting from attempts to provide emotionally-demanding care in the face of frequent failures, persistent obstacles, and inadequate resources to support either stress-reduction or successful care delivery. Continuous-care stress affects many feral cat caregivers as well. One 15-year caregiver was emotionally stunned when an older friend of hers, who was known and admired throughout the cat community as being a “cat saint,” died suddenly of a stroke. She said:

... problem is that she didn't have time to prepare anyone to take over. Where are her cats, who is caring for them? We made sure her own cats were taken into the very best homes, but we don't know where all of her ferals are and so what will happen to them if they can't be found ... it's just haunting me.... And, I started thinking, who will take care of my cats if something happens to me. Nobody, that's who—because, there are so many, maybe somebody who knows me, but it's so much work and time and money. I have cried a lot this month just thinking about it.

The following comment from the spouse of one of the more active TNR group members captures how such continuous-care stress can affect caretakers' families as well.

I think the thing that bothers me the most is that there is never a day off. She is at this, in one way or another 365 days a year. Every night, no matter what we are doing, she has to stop and go out to feed up to 20 cats. If we have to go out of town, [she] has to spend several days before that trying to find people to feed while we are gone, and while we are gone, she worries about them and texts every day to make sure there are no problems with the cats. We both work full-time and make a comfortable living, so I guess we can afford it, but the several hundred dollars spent every month on cat food, meds, vet visits and other cat-related stuff really adds up. I know she loves the cats and I admire her compassion and her dedication, but I worry about her and it puts a good bit of stress on both of us. And I don't see any end to it.

The comments of this respondent reveal the complexity of emotions and stresses both family members and the caregivers experience as a result of their continuous commitment. Indeed, such support from significant others is vital to the wellbeing of caregivers, especially on those occasions when they feel emotionally traumatized by the loss of cats or other caretakers, or by the denigrating and stigmatizing actions of those who oppose their work.

Stigmatized-Care Fatigue

It is our contention that the combination of factors contributing to peripheral-care stress as well as hostility-fueled human impediments experienced by feral cat caretakers, and perhaps some animal shelter workers whose work is routinely denigrated by certain segments of the human population, produces a particular form of compassion fatigue, which we shall refer to as stigmatized-care fatigue. The factors that make this form of compassion fatigue unique are the absence of institutional support for managing stress and the stigmatized status of the work, which in some cases is rooted in a speciesist resentment of feral cats and, by association, those who care for them. Negative stereotypes of both feral cats and those who care for them are well known to those who provide such care.

One technique for resisting personal stigmatization by caregivers is to remind others, and sometimes each other, of the clear distinction they make between what they do and the activities of “real crazy cat ladies,” which is a term some reserve to refer to cat hoarders. Even caregivers who might never have been overtly negatively labeled for their efforts nevertheless are aware that such an incident could occur at any moment when they are working with cats in publicly visible places. Thus, many workers try to reduce their visibility, or “evidentness” (Goffman, 1963, p. 48), by trying to limit their exposure to judgmental eyes by doing their primary caretaking in the early morning or under the “cover” (Goffman, 1963, p. 102) of night, for they know that although their personal identities might not yet have been discredited, they are at every moment “discreditable” (Goffman 1963, p. 4).

Such awareness produces a pervasive level of background emotional stress, which occasionally spikes when workers are directly insulted or threatened by others. The following quote from one of the feral colony managers we interviewed reveals how reactions of disapproving others at her workplace had made her feel the pain of a stigmatized identity.

They thought that TNR was ridiculous, and it was insane.... They make you feel terrible about it, bad about it, crazy about it, and it's like, "What are you doing with your life? Why are you wasting your time with this?"

Another respondent who fed several free-roaming neighborhood cats in different secluded locations pointed out that she would only put out food in publicly visible locations when a hungry cat was close by and would eat within a short span of time. On one occasion, after placing some food on a sidewalk near her house and walking back inside for a brief period, the following incident, involving her next-door neighbors, occurred.

Because I tried to keep the cats separated, because I knew who could eat together and who couldn't ... I put food down in front—not on their porch or anything—on the sidewalk in front of their house, which is supposedly city property, and one of the boys picked the food up and came and threw it at my front door and threw it all over my front porch, what I had put out on the sidewalk.

Shortly after that incident, the neighbors walked over to her house “en masse” and confronted her about feeding the cats in front of their house.

Although such incidents as these are common, caregivers are occasionally exposed to acts of extreme cruelty. One of the more aggressive reactions was reported to us by an acquaintance of a TNR group member who had been confronted by angry neighbors about feeding in the neighborhood. As she reports it, the next morning he “found two cat heads (decapitated) on [top of] his trash bin. He knew it was one of the neighbors, but couldn't prove it.” Such incidents, which are typically interpreted as offenses to the very identities of caregivers, reveal the deep and often stigmatized nature of feral cat caretaking.

It is important to point out, however, that all of those with whom we talked associate positive emotions with their interactions with the cats. Unfortunately, emotionally rewarding activities and interactions can be occasionally disrupted by hostile others, whose actions transform positive moments into negative emotionally wrenching experiences. For some, the cumulative effect of such encounters creates negative associations with activities they once loved and felt good about. It is, therefore, not surprising that one of the most disheartening emotions stigmatized caregivers experience is an increased cynicism toward and dislike for large segments of their own species. The following email communication from a TNR veteran, who had worked long and hard with groups in her city to bring about tolerance of TNR work, expresses several of

the emotional symptoms of stigmatized-care fatigue as a result of having her efforts thwarted.

I am worn out and can't do this by myself.... So ... I don't know.... It's just so upsetting and I feel hopeless. I am not a depressed type of person, but I have to be honest and say that I have been depressed for a while over all this. But I thought the light was at the end of the tunnel once TNR would be embraced. Well ... the city officials in [city name] cemented the tunnel shut and they are celebrating!

The great majority of TNR workers with whom we talked commented on the additional stress and fatigue of having to tolerate the dismissive and/or hostile actions of those who stigmatize the work they do. In contrast, human caregivers are widely admired for their efforts. Moreover, although the compassion fatigue they experienced can be profound, various forms of institutional support are typically available to them. Unfortunately, such support does not exist for those who voluntarily care for nonhuman animals.

Absence or Loss of Institutional Support for the Management of Care Stress

Although the various sources of stress and care fatigue, which often lead to burnout, take a heavy toll on animal rescue and care workers, not all suffer to the same degree. Supportive friends and family and adequate financial resources can significantly mitigate some of the negative factors associated with rescue and caregiving. Unfortunately, as several of the previous examples suggest, many caregivers lack such resources and, unlike those whose care work occurs within organizations or as part of paid employment, must finance their own activities and rely on institutional and organizational support that is either tenuous, completely outside their control, or nonexistent. An example of this is the relationship that TNR groups have with domestic animal adoption groups who in turn often have formal relationships with city shelters and for-profit businesses, such as Petco, Petsmart, and PetSense.

TNR caregivers often rely on the financial resources of these groups to underwrite some of their activities, but most commonly depend on them to support the placement of kittens or abandoned companion cats who are born in or released into their colonies. These resources have become more and more tenuous in the community in which our ethnography took place, mainly as a result of Petsmart's abandonment of its policy of allowing local non-profit

rescue groups to occupy adoption space for cats on their premises. As the following email exchange between two rescuers illustrates, the loss of even occasional institutional support can have devastating consequences on the wellbeing of both cats and those who care for them.

I was informed by the Petsmart manager this evening that we are going to have to give up the cat adoption room at Petsmart ... as early as Monday!!! He said he is going to try to negotiate some time for us, but there aren't any guarantees.... The ramifications of that decision is [sic] dreadful. I feel as though I have been punched in the gut. I still have almost 30 cats on the waiting list.

One recipient of her email responded: "My car is out of commission, my phone is disconnected and I don't have money for rent ... so don't ask me." This response shows the extent to which caregivers exhaust themselves and their resources, further reducing their resistance to burnout.

Burnout and Withdrawal from Caretaking

Continuous ongoing care of feral cats in the face of frequent failures and persistent obstacles, coupled with a lack of institutional support, widespread disapproval, and stigmatization leads to demoralization, exhaustion, and sometimes burnout. Burnout constitutes a "state of physical and emotional and mental exhaustion caused by the depletion of ability to cope with ... the ongoing demand characteristics (stress) of our daily lives" (Maslach, 1982, p. 11). It ultimately reduces the caregiver's ability and willingness to bear such suffering.

Recent research suggests that burnout unfolds through "a gradual progression from exhaustion due to the demands of the job, to cynicism about the job and feelings of depersonalization toward others at work, which ultimately leads to lower efficacy in doing the job and poorer job performance" (Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, & Mutanen, 2002). According to Valent (2002), burnout is most often the result of failure to achieve goals. "When goals are being attained, helpers feel that they are executing their will.... They have high morale, and feel successful.... Inability to achieve goals is accompanied by frustration, a sense of loss of control and impotence ..." (Valent, 2002, p. 27).

The results of burnout, which we have also observed among some feral cat caregivers, include a decline in physical and mental health, and ultimately withdrawal from the work. When we emailed a veteran feral cat caretaker,

asking her if she would be willing to talk to us about burnout, she responded with the following.

You wanted to know what burnout looks like.... Well here it is. I officially hate cat rescue. I don't want to see another single plea for help, another sad-eyed dog at the shelter about to be euthanized, another "kittens in my backyard" email, another bitch session between [names of two caretakers] ... I'm barely capable of giving a rat's ass about my own personal animals with everything they're doing to destroy my house and its contents right now ... I'm unliking and unfollowing animal groups right and left on FB. I hate the [name of rescue group] page. They may love what [name of individual] is doing, but I've stopped paying attention ... I'm a pressure boiler, the whistle is going off and has been for some time and I'm pretty sure my lid is coming off if one more stupid thing happens regarding animals. I'm just about ready to euthanize my 2 oldest cats [She did not]. But I know I'll hate myself when I come to my senses.

The exasperation expressed here represents many of the common elements discussed above, which ultimately lead to burnout: discord among caregivers; lack of support; reaching the personal limits of time, resources, and empathy; compassion fatigue; and a sense of futility that comes from what feels like an endless number of cats in need of help. Although this caregiver curtailed her involvement with certain rescue and care groups in order to salvage enough emotional energy to continue managing and caretaking her own colonies, some caregivers do completely withdraw. A recently retired caregiver best exemplifies this response in her revelation, "I reached the end of the line; the stress, it was killing me." After reaching the point of burnout, she quit all groups, worked with a barn-cat organization to relocate several of the wildest ferals in her group, and moved out of the apartment complex where the managers had harassed her for years about feeding cats.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented an ethnographically derived elucidation of the emotional lives of feral cat caretakers, which allows us to provide a preliminary model, illustrated in Figure 1, of the processes leading them to burnout. We offer this model with the hope that our work will be of help to other researchers who wish to study some of these processes in more detail, or in other

situational or cultural contexts and spheres of caregiving—especially those focused on nonhuman animals.

Figley and Roop (2006) argue that it is the nature of caregivers to “perceive the needs of others as greater than their own, which makes them willing self-sacrificers” (p. 47). According to Jacobs (1991), caregivers feel a personal need to right past wrongs. Indeed, it appears that many animal care workers are motivated by a moral mission to protect those they perceive as innocent victims of humans and the institutions and systems they create. Their work is a quest—not just for care and protection of, but also justice for, those who continue to be wronged—which is part of what justifies their sacrifices and energizes their often-extreme efforts. When those efforts lead to successful outcomes, they feel renewed, justified, and ready to continue the fight, but when their efforts fail, they are vulnerable to stress, fatigue, and ultimately to depression and burnout.

Of necessity, much of this article has focused on stress resulting from situations and events that produce negative emotions. However, it is also important to note that feral cat caretakers typically feel very positively toward their cats and most of the work they do for them. Such words as love, joy, and happiness appear frequently in discussions of their interactions with and caretaking of cats. It is when they talk about the responses of other humans to their care work that such emotions as anxiety, fear, anger, and even hate emerge. It is not surprising that those who feel a moral commitment to caring for marginalized nonhuman animals, yet are denied sufficient institutional support to help them, deal with the personal dangers of caring and eventually suffer burnout.

One way some compensate for a lack of institutional support is by forging close, supportive interpersonal bonds with other caregivers. For example, recent research has documented the mutually supportive efforts of feral cat caretakers as they collectively manage rescue and adoption conflicts with other humans (Thompson & Young, 2014), or work together to resolve the frequent moral dilemmas they face individually and collectively as a result of their work (Young & Thompson, 2017). When asked to describe their feelings toward other cat caretakers, such feelings as love, affection, and respect are used. In most cases, those bonds sustain and energize. Occasionally, however, positive bonds are eroded by differences of opinion regarding how they should respond to the pressures of outside forces, which threaten to delegitimize and obstruct their mission.

Faced with continuous resistance to their efforts to humanely and sustainably control feral cat populations by the very communities they see as benefiting from such practices, they begin to resent not only their opponents but

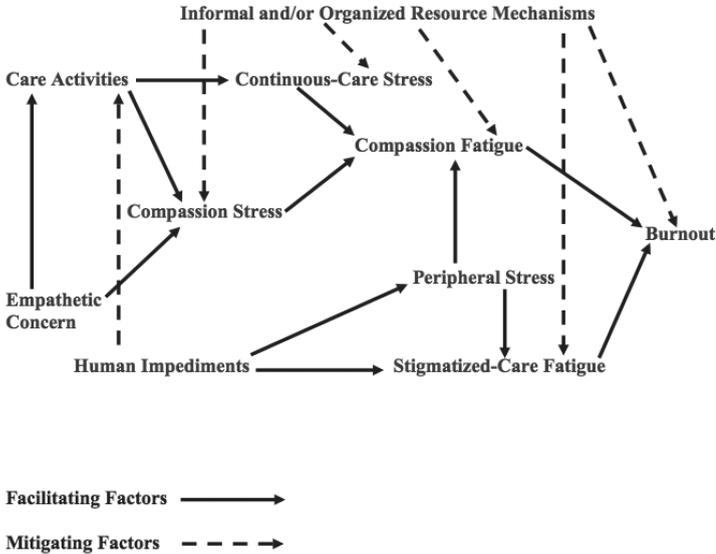


FIGURE 1 The processes of stress, fatigue, and burnout among feral cat caretakers.

also those who are simply apathetic toward the needless suffering of innocent animals. As the work becomes progressively more daunting physically, psychologically, and financially, some begin to lose hope and feel increasingly cynical, resentful, and less empathetic toward their own species. In the end, this is perhaps the most dispiriting and tragic outcome of all.

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