OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN ANIMAL SHELTER WORKERS

by

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research focusing broadly on occupational stressors experienced by animal shelter workers. The present study aimed to classify aspects of shelter work that employees report as stressful and determine whether they fit with current perspectives on generic occupational stress. The sample consisted of 22 female adults employed in a variety of positions at shelters in Canada and the United States. A semi-structured interview used prompts based on current occupational stress literature and allowed for exploration of unprompted topics of workplace stress. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed 17 stressor categories, six of which were identified as shelter specific stressor categories. Evidence of trauma was not observed in the data. This study supports the contention that stressors exist in shelter work beyond euthanasia and that current models of occupational stress may be insufficient for describing the experiences of animal shelter workers.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There is very little peer-reviewed research which focuses broadly on the occupational stress experienced by animal shelter workers. A small number of articles in the last 10 years have examined the personal and organizational costs associated with euthanasia-related strain (Baran et al., 2009; Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve, Rogelberg, Spitzmuller, & DiGiacomo, 2005; Rogelberg et al., 2007b; Rohlf & Bennett, 2005) and coping strategies shelter workers engage in to reduce stress (Baran et al., 2009; Frommer & Arluke, 1999; Rogelberg et al., 2007a) but there is little information available on what shelter workers find stressful about their work without a pre-existing research assumption that euthanasia is the most stressful part of the job. The existing literature does indicate that shelter workers experience significant occupational stress, often referencing the unique nature of animal shelter work. Unlike hospice workers and nurses, who most often deal with death arising from natural causes, animal shelter workers experience prolonged exposure to the death and suffering of animals arising from the societal issue of pet overpopulation and the physical limitations of shelters to care for them (Baran et al., 2009). The animal deaths in shelters are often ongoing and there is little time to work through grief (Figley & Roop, 2006). Also notably different from most health care occupations is that shelter workers are faced with the task of personally ending the life of clients that they have spent sometimes significant amounts of time caring for and building a bond with. The majority of shelter employees enter the profession motivated by a love of animals and an interest in alleviating suffering (Figley & Roop, 2006; Reeve et al., 2005; Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). However, many experience a moral conflict between their personal values and shelter procedures compounded by a lack of control over organizational level decisions that impact their everyday work (Reeve et
Although euthanasia related issues seem to have been accepted in the literature as the most significant source of stress, shelter workers have reported further stressors including a negative public perception of their work, negative media, lack of understanding among friends and family, conflict among colleagues, and poor physical working conditions (Figley & Roop, 2006). These external demands combined with a concern for animals, an empathic response to the suffering of animals, and prolonged exposure to suffering, contribute to the total experience of occupational stress in animal shelter workers (Figley & Roop, 2006). The purpose of the present study is to document and categorize the environmental factors experienced by shelter workers as stressors and identify the themes that emerge from the data. Whether current perspectives on occupational stress and its outcomes are sufficient to fully understand the experience of strain in shelter workers is a further purpose of this study.

1.1. Defining stress

There are several contrasting viewpoints on what comprises the complex concept of stress within the literature and popular culture. This lack of consensus goes beyond an issue of semantics as the operationalization of stress has a defining impact on how research is conducted and results are interpreted (Cooper, Dewe, & O’Driscoll, 2001; Shane, 2010). It is therefore important for any study of stress to begin by clarifying the terminology to be used. In their text *Work Stress*, Sulsky and Smith define stress as “any circumstance that places special physical and/or psychological demands on an organism leading to physiological, psychological, and behavioural outcomes. If these demands persist over time, long-term or chronic undesirable outcomes or strains may result” (2005; p. 6). This contrasts with the World Health Organization’s definition of occupational stress as being “the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities
and which challenge their ability to cope” (World Health Organization, 2014). The former views stress as a dynamic process, while the latter defines it as a response. Further discrepancies exist across the disciplines of psychology, biology, sociology and medicine (Clegg, 2001; Cooper et al., 2001). Clearly, the meaning of stress remains a subject of considerable debate, threatening the validity of the construct (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) and contributing to fragmentation within the literature (Cooper 1998; Hart & Cooper, 2001).

For the purpose of this study the terminology associated with a dynamic process, or transactional, definition of stress will be adopted. The transactional approach to the study of stress, though not without its critics, has been applied widely in the occupational stress literature (Mark & Smith, 2011). Briefly, the transactional approach contends that an environmental demand becomes a stressor only when appraised by an individual as exceeding their available resources and therefore threatening their well-being. This threat triggers physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses, or strain, in an attempt to cope. The consequences of this strain at the individual and organizational level are called the outcomes. The term stress refers to the entire process of transaction between the individual and the environment encompassing stressors, appraisals, strains, and outcomes (Beehr, 1998; Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sulsky & Smith, 2005). By definition, the extent to which a potential stressor is perceived as such depends on individual appraisal; strain associated with a particular stimulus in one person does not mean it is inevitable in another. Stress theories based on the transactional perspective “emphasize the importance of thoroughly exploring the nature and scope of environmental factors that have the potential to create strain for individuals in the workplace” (Cooper et al., 2001, p. 27). This emphasis supports the value of the present study’s primary goal.
1.2. Costs of occupational stress in the general literature

The importance of aiming to better understand occupational stress in shelter workers is underscored by decades of research identifying the physical health, mental health, and organizational consequences of work-related strain. A review of the general stress literature reveals the potential manifestations of chronic job strain including substance abuse, depression, anxiety, fatigue, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, gastrointestinal illnesses, absenteeism, increased turnover, workplace accidents, increased health care costs, and reduced organizational productivity (Baba, Jamal, & Tourigny, 1998; Belkic, Schnall, Landsbergis, & Baker, 2000; Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Conway, Vickers, Ward, & Rahe, 1981; Cox et al., 2000; Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Ganster, Fox, Dwyer, 2001; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Kristensen, 1996; Manning, Jackson, & Fusilier, 1996; Rosenthal & Alter, 2012; Wang & Patten, 2001). Additionally, anger and irritability have been noted as responses to work-related stressors that can impact both relationships in the workplace and at home (Israel et al., 1989; Kendall, Murphy, O’Neill, & Bursnall, 2000). Employees in caregiving occupations such as mental health professions, crisis counselling, and nursing appear to face additional consequences. These occupations require an ability to empathize with often traumatized clients. This empathic ability and intense involvement makes an individual a valuable asset for both the organization and clients but may also put the practitioner at special risk. The potential consequences of this risk have been labelled in the literature as the costs of caring (Figley & Roop, 2006; White, 2006). These costs of caring have been particularly well documented in the compassion fatigue research of Figley (1995; 2002) and may be categorized into physical, emotional, and psychological signs and symptoms (White, 2006). Figley suggests the following as costs of working with a suffering clientele: anxiety when thinking about the
situations of clients; feeling helpless as a caregiver; guilt for both feeling they could have done more and feeling responsible for the clients’ situation; numbness, or an inability to empathize anymore; sadness; depression; hypersensitivity; overwhelmed, or feeling like they have reached their limit in terms of what they can give to clients; and depleted as a helper due to quality or quantity of work (Figley & Roop, 2006). A summary of further costs found in the literature is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Signs and symptoms of the costs of caring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Psychological</th>
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<tr>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>Changes in life view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep disturbance</td>
<td>Rage</td>
<td>Decreased feeling of personal safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appetite change</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Loss of professional identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypervigilance</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Loss of faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased energy</td>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>Increased interpersonal conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Numbness</td>
<td>Increasing cynicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing difficulties</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Isolation from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid heartbeat</td>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Low motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impaired immune system</td>
<td>Emotional roller coaster</td>
<td>Apathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic complaints</td>
<td>Overly sensitive</td>
<td>Decreased ability to cope with stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightmares</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Negativity</td>
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As nursing has been compared to animal shelter work in terms of emotional demands (Baran et al., 2009) it is interesting to note findings from the most recent Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) report on the health of health care workers. Nurses in general had the highest average absenteeism rate due to illness or disability across all health professions and
twice the average of all included occupations. Psychiatric nurses and nurses working in long-term care facilities were slightly more likely than other registered nurses to submit lower self-report ratings of general health. Finally, those nurses in positions involving direct contact with patients, as compared to administration or management roles, reported higher ratings of dissatisfaction in their current job (CIHI, 2007). Intuitively, it appears that the qualities that link nursing in general to shelter work, that is, direct empathic long-term contact with patients, are the qualities associated with higher ratings within the nursing profession on factors related to occupational stress.

1.3. Classifications of occupational stressors

Most people who work in shelters agree that it is stressful and euthanasia practices are often cited as the foremost cause of stress. This perception raises at least two issues: First, can we understand the impact of euthanasia practices on shelter workers in the context of existing models of occupational stress; Second are there other sources of occupational stress that are unique to shelter work and, if so, can these be understood in the context of existing models?

Research on occupational stress in animal shelter workers is in need of a framework that captures the unique nature of their work and stressors. Such a framework would help demonstrate both what stressors shelter work has in common with more conventional occupations as well as highlight where it diverges. The development of this framework could also stimulate future research in the area of animal shelter worker stress. This study offers an initial effort toward this goal.

There are several classification systems used to organize stressors within the general occupational stress literature (Brough & Briggs, 2010; Cooper et al., 2001; Cooper & Marshall,
These systems all ultimately reach the same end point in terms of what is commonly endorsed as stressful by workers with slight differences in the levels attributed to stressors when viewed as a hierarchy. At the highest level in a hierarchical system, sources of occupational stress may be identified as either Job-Related or Individual-Related (Dollard et al., 2003; Vokic & Bogdanic, 2007). Job-related stressors may be further classified as associated with either the characteristics and nature of the work, including job content and demands, workload, scheduling, and physical environment, or the social and organizational context of the work, including organizational roles, work relationships, career development, and organizational factors (Cooper et al., 2001; Cox et al., 2000; Dollard et al., 2003; Murphy, 1995). Individual-related stressors may be further classified as either related to individual differences, such as personality and coping style, or the work-home interface, involving conflict between the demands of work and home-life. As an examination of individual differences goes beyond the scope of this study only the work-home interface will be considered in the current study. This classification system will act as a baseline from which to compare the results of the qualitative analysis in this study. To facilitate comparison a brief summary of the stressor categories follows.

**1.3.1. Job characteristics and nature of the work.** The primary determinants of stress within this category include factors associated with the content and demands of the job, the physical working environment, workload, and scheduling.

**1.3.1.1. Job content and demands.** Characteristics specific to the task content of a position may contribute to the experience of stress in employees. Potential stressors noted in the literature include high physical, cognitive, and emotional demands, lack of task variety,
meaningless work, and exposure to risks and hazards (Brough & Briggs, 2010; Cooper et al., 2001; Dollard et al., 2003).

**1.3.1.2. Physical environment.** Aspects of the physical work environment that have been associated with strain include the spatial organization of the workplace and ambient conditions (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005). For example, open-plan office settings where workers have less perceived control over the quantity and quality of their social interactions and more exposure to potential distractions have been associated with employee depression, anxiety, discontent, fatigue, and somatic complaints (Fried, 1990; Griffin, Fuhrer, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2002; Hatch, 1984; Hedge, 1984; Wineman, 1982). Studies have also suggested that access to natural light and natural views from office windows may be associated with job satisfaction, general well-being, and may act as a buffer against job stress (Barling et al., 2005; Leather, Pygras, Beale, & Lawrence, 1998). Unwanted sound has been found to impact physical and mental health and cognitive functioning (Dalton & Behm, 2007; Seidman & Standring, 2010). Specifically in medical settings it has been noted to contribute to misunderstandings of instruction that could threaten patient and colleague safety (Beyea, 2007) and linked to “emotional exhaustion, fatigue, and burnout” in nurses (Tunajek, 2010). Potentially applicable to the animal shelter environment is research suggesting that noise is perceived as less stressful when it is expected but more stressful when it is unpredictable or when there are changes in the level of the noise (Jewell, 1998).

**1.3.1.3. Workload.** Workload can be perceived as a stressor when experienced both quantitatively, that is, having too much (*quantitative overload*) or too little (*quantitative underload*) work that is expected to be accomplished in a set amount of time, and qualitatively, when the employee feels they either lack the skills required to fulfill their duties (*qualitative
overload) or that their abilities are not being used to their full potential (qualitative underload) (Cooper et al., 2001). Workload stressors have been associated with job dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic symptoms (Cooper et al., 2001) (Cooper et al., 2001).

1.3.1.4. Scheduling. There is evidence that the number of hours an individual spends working may be correlated with overall physiological and psychological health, including associations with cardiovascular health issues, problems in personal relationships, increases in fatigue levels and reductions in motivation (Sparks, Cooper, Fried, & Shirom, 1997). Alternative work schedules, particularly shift work, has also been widely studied and associated with reductions in subjective well-being and physical health (Folkard, 1996).

1.3.2. The social and organizational context of the work. The primary determinants of stress within this category include factors associated with organizational roles, work relationships, career development, and organizational factors (Dollard et al., 2003; Cooper et al., 2001).

1.3.2.1. Organizational roles. A role refers to the function an employee serves in their workplace. Strain associated with one’s role in the workplace is generally thought to be a function of an uncertainty about the relationships between effort and satisfactory performance and successful job performance and reward (Beehr et al., 1987). For example, role ambiguity occurs when an employee does not possess enough information to understand their role leading to uncertainty about what is expected of them (Weiner & Craighead, 2010). Role conflict occurs when the expectations and values associated with one position or multiple roles in work and/or life compete or conflict (Cooper et al., 2001). Role overload occurs when an employee
experiences uncertainty about their ability to meet the demands required of the multiple roles they hold (Cooper et al., 2001). Role ambiguity, role overload, and to a lesser extent role overload have been associated with psychological strain in multiple studies (Day & Livingstone, 2001; Narayanan, Menon, & Spector, 1999; O’Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). Finally, there is evidence suggesting that a workplace role involving responsibility for the lives and safety of others may be associated in some employees with significant psychological strain (Cooper et al., 2001).

1.3.2.2. Work relationships. Potential stressors in terms of work relationships include interpersonal conflict, lack of social support, and leadership style (Cooper et al., 2001). Interpersonal conflict has been confirmed as a major source of strain across several occupations and, despite somewhat mixed findings in the literature, meta-analysis has confirmed a small but consistent negative correlation between social support and occupational strains (Alexander-Stamatios, 2009; Narayanan et al., 1999; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Further potential interpersonal stressors noted by Colligan and Higgins (2005) include “harassment, discrimination, threats of violence, and managerial bullying” (p. 7). In terms of leadership style, an authoritarian or autocratic style and task orientation tend to be associated with strain in employees (Cooper et al., 2001).

1.3.2.3. Career development. Potential stressors within this category include job insecurity, under- or over-promotion, career stagnation, and unsatisfactory remuneration (Cooper et al., 2001; Dollard et al., 2003). The threat of job loss or redundancy has been associated with stress related illness, interpersonal conflict, decreased organizational commitment, and decreased job satisfaction (Cameron, Freeman, & Mishra, 1993; Cobb & Kasl, 1977; Luthans & Sommer, 1999). There is evidence suggesting that a lack of promotion or progress in one’s career may be
a major source of job dissatisfaction (Jewell, 1998). However, being promoted beyond one’s abilities, or neglecting to provide adequate training for a new position, has also been associated with lower levels of well-being and satisfaction (Cooper et al., 2001).

1.3.2.4. Organizational factors. Strain due to organizational factors is often associated with the structure and climate of the workplace (Cooper et al., 2001). A lack of opportunity to participate in decisions impacting their work, lack of, or ineffective, communication between management and staff, and office politics have all been associated with job strain (Cooper et al., 2001; Harris & Kacmar, 2005).

1.3.3. Work-home interface. The conflicting demands of work and home may contribute to strain in three forms (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The first, time-based conflict, occurs as a result of the time and energy required to successfully meet competing demands in both roles (Cooper et al., 2001). Behaviour-based conflict occurs when behavioural expectations required for success in one role are inappropriate or ineffective in the other role (Greenhaus, Allen, & Spector, 2006). Finally, strain-based conflict occurs when emotional strain in one role carries into and influences performance in the other role (Cooper et al., 2001). Work-home conflict has been associated in the literature with several physical and mental health symptoms and job dissatisfaction (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005).

1.4. Stressors in the animal shelter context

1.4.1. Euthanasia as stressor. Research addressing occupational stress in animal shelter workers is sparse and almost exclusively limited to discussions of euthanasia related strain. The available evidence makes it clear that euthanasia related work is an important source of strain to consider in shelter workers. Qualitative studies have revealed employee emotional responses to
euthanasia including anger, guilt, frustration, disgust and sadness and coping behaviours including attempting to limit attachment to the animals in their care, taking steps to instill guilt in surrenderers, blaming surrenderers and the general public for making euthanasia necessary in the first place, and leaving the profession (Arluke, 1994; Baran et al., 2009; Frommer & Arluke, 1999; Hart & Mader, 1995). One of the few quantitative studies in this area found evidence that employees involved in euthanasia related work may experience higher levels of work strain, somatic complaints, work family conflict, and lower levels of work satisfaction than those not directly involved with euthanasia (Reeve & Rogelberg, 2005). These differences remained significant after controlling for a measure of general job stress (Reeve & Rogelberg, 2005).

Nevertheless, research conducted by the Humane Society of the United States concluded that stress, at some level, is prevalent in shelter employees at all organizational levels (HSUS, 2003-2004). There is also some evidence suggesting a positive correlation between euthanasia rate and employee turnover (Rogelberg et al., 2007b). Interestingly, this correlation remained significant between turnover and the euthanasia of dogs but not cats suggesting that the euthanasia of dogs may be perceived as greater stressor among employees than the euthanasia of other species (Rogelberg et al., 2007b). Further correlations suggest that the reasoning behind euthanasia, particularly when not based on health or behavioural issues, may be associated with employee strain and turnover (Rogelberg et al., 2007b). This finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence suggesting that shelter workers experience frustration and grief over the “senseless killing of healthy animals”, particularly when alternative avenues of care or rehabilitation have not been explored (Arluke, 1994).

**1.4.2. Non-euthanasia related stressors.** There is limited information available in the peer reviewed literature on stressors in the shelter workplace not directly related to euthanasia.
From individual euthanasia focused studies it is suggested that employees in smaller shelters may be at higher risk for job strain compared to larger facilities (Reeve & Rogelberg, 2005). Lack of satisfaction with social support, particularly from management, may also be associated with strain (Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). In the same study newer employees reported higher levels of stress than those in the job for many years suggesting that either employees learn to cope with work strain more effectively over time or that the most highly distressed new employees simply do not last long in the profession (Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). Finally, when asked about what they consider the worst aspects of their job, a large majority of respondents endorsed the physical work environment (i.e. smells and mess) and the threat of personal injury, followed by dealing with human clients, euthanasia, and general concern about the animals under their care (Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). Further potential stressors in the animal shelter workplace have been suggested by Figley and Roop (2006) including adoption rates, staffing levels, relationships with human and animal clients, government regulations, a sense of indispensability, and the board of directors. The public’s perceptions, or misperceptions, about shelter work, along with negative media portrayals, may also contribute to strain in shelter workers (Reeve et al., 2005). These qualitative results suggest the presence of stressors of perceived significance for animal shelter workers in addition to euthanasia issues.

1.4.3. Trauma and shelter work. It has been proposed that the strain shelter workers experience is associated, at least in part, by what is called the caring-killing paradox (Arluke, 1994; Reeve et al., 2005). That is, shelter workers entering the profession out of concern for animal welfare are faced with both caring for the animals almost in a surrogate owner role and ending the lives of the same animals. Certainly, survey results appear to support that individuals choose to work in the shelter profession for primarily animal-focused reasons (Figley & Roop,
2006; Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). Some have proposed that the strain associated with this paradox is not accounted for in the general occupational stress literature and could be described as a moral stressor (Rollin, 1986); a conflict between the image of one’s ideal self and the reality of their work (Reeve et al., 2004). The attachment, or bond, that may develop between a shelter worker and an animal, or animals, under their care, is another key factor that may put them at special risk. The presence of the compassion and empathy required to create this strong bond, along with ongoing exposure to the suffering of animals has been theorized as a vital component in the development of a special form of strain in shelter workers (Figley & Roop, 2006). The physical and psychological symptoms associated with this strain in shelter workers have led some researchers to consider whether they are experiencing a form of traumatic stress. Two forms of traumatic stress have been proposed within the literature to account for the experiences of shelter workers: compassion fatigue and perpetration-induced traumatic stress.

The first, compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is closely related to post traumatic stress disorder, sharing symptoms including “intrusive imagery, avoidance, hyperarousal, distressing emotions, cognitive changes, and functional impairment” (Bride, Radey, & Figley, 2007) in response to a traumatic event or events. The exposure to the traumatic material in the case of compassion fatigue, however, is indirect and often experienced by caregivers (Figley & Roop, 2006). Figley and Roop (2006) have defined compassion fatigue as physical and emotional exhaustion due to “the demands of being empathic and helpful to those who are suffering” (p. 11). Research conducted by the Humane Society of the United States involving administering Compassion Fatigue Self Tests to 1000 animal shelter workers confirmed that 54% of respondents were at extremely high risk of developing compassion fatigue (HSUS, 2003-2004). The results also suggested that employees at all levels, from kennel
attendant to executive director, were at equal risk regardless of involvement in euthanasia (Figley & Roop, 2006). Figley contends that animal shelter workers are at higher risk of compassion fatigue than those in other care-giving professions because the unique pressures inherent in their work may heighten the impact of the costs of caring (see Table 1) (Figley & Roop, 2006).

The second form of traumatic stress was proposed by MacNair (2002) as a subcategory of PTSD; Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS). PITS grew out of questioning the potential impact active participation in a traumatizing event might have on those who are involved in bringing it about (MacNair, 2002). This phenomenon has been explored in relation to the work of combat veterans, executioners, and abortion workers but its discussion in the context of animal shelter workers has received very little attention in the literature (MacNair, 2002; Rohlf & Bennett, 2005). MacNair (2002) has defined PITS as “any portions of the symptomatology of PTSD, at clinical or subclinical levels, which result from situations that would be traumatic if someone were a victim, but situations for which the person in question was a causal participant” (p. 7). Outside of symptoms aligned with the PTSD criteria of intrusion, avoidance and numbing, and arousal (APA, 2000), the consequences of killing are also thought to include “anxiety, panic, depression, substance abuse” and “increased paranoia or a sense of disintegration, or dissociation or amnesia at the time of the trauma itself” (MacNair, 2000, p. 7). The experience of PITS, as described in the extremely limited literature on abortion workers, appears to share similarities with the experiences of animal shelter workers. For example, responses to abortion work have been reported to include displacing the blame for the act towards the client, experiencing a discomfort with the practice while maintaining a firm belief in abortion rights, and a need to “obsessively” talk about work experiences. The emotional
demands of the work were also noted to significantly impact interpersonal relationships (MacNair, 2002).

As PITS and compassion fatigue share similar symptomatology it may prove difficult to differentiate between the two based solely on quantitative measures of trauma. Qualitative data may provide valuable information as to whether shelter workers may be at risk of PITS or compassion fatigue by exploring the nature of the precipitating event(s) and their responses. Of particular significance would be whether the trauma was experienced as direct or indirect, that is, due to the act of euthanasia or exposure to the suffering of the animals, whether the shelter worker views themselves as a caregiver, and whether there are traumatic stress symptoms present in their responses.

1.5. Purpose of the study

It is commonly acknowledged that working in an animal shelter is stressful and existing research attributes much of that strain to euthanasia practices. However, there has been very little systematic research on stress among shelter workers in general and virtually no research with a primary focus on determining what other variables contribute to stress in this occupation. The present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by using qualitative methods to document and classify factors that are perceived by shelter workers as stressors and better understand their responses to strain. The second purpose of this study is to investigate whether current perspectives on occupational stress and its outcomes, including compassion fatigue and perpetration-induced trauma, are sufficient to encompass the experiences of shelter workers.
CHAPTER 2

Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty-four people volunteered to be interviewed in response to electronic and hard-copy flyers describing the study. One male participant could not complete the interview due to time constraints. One female participant withdrew from the study via email before the interview time was set up. A further 10 did not respond to two follow-up emails after their initial expression of interest in participating in the study. Four of these 10 were male. The final sample consisted of 22 adults. At the time of the interview 21 were employed at animal shelters in Canada and the United States. One additional participant had recently quit her job at an animal shelter. All participants identified as Caucasian and female. Inclusion criteria required that participants’ work involve direct daily contact with the animals residing in their shelter. The positions held by participants included manager, supervisor, animal care and control officer, community outreach and education, animal behaviour worker, adoptions counsellor, veterinary technician, and customer care worker.

2.2. Procedure

Data collection began following approval from the University of Toronto Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board. The data used in this study were qualitative interviews with animal shelter employees conducted between April and August, 2013. Participants were recruited through email and hard-copy flyers distributed directly to shelters in the Greater Toronto Area and at conferences attended by shelter workers allowing for the inclusion of participants from throughout North America (see Appendix A). Animal shelter
directors were also contacted to request their assistance in distributing the flyers to potential participants (see Appendix B). The flyers described the study and asked potential participants to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating or for further information.

Interested participants were provided with an electronic copy of the information letter (see Appendix C). Those who agreed to participate met with the interviewer in person or were interviewed by phone. Prior to initiating the interview, participants were provided a hard-copy of the information letter and consent form to review and sign (see Appendix C). The interviews were approximately 1.5 hours each in duration and were audio recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and participants were assigned random pseudonyms. Twenty-five dollars was donated to a shelter of the participant’s choice in recognition of the time required for them to participate in this study.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Semi-structured interview. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to allow participants the opportunity to fully explore and elaborate on topics of personal significance (see Appendix D). The interviews began by collecting demographic information followed by a discussion about what the participant’s present job entails. Participants were then asked an open-ended question about their general experience of stress working in an animal shelter. The rest of the interview was guided by a set of prompts addressing several categories of potential stressors that the current study sought to gain more information about. The list of categories was developed through a review of the general occupational stress literature and from research and commentary on stress among animal shelter workers. The topics covered included: Relationships with the animals, euthanasia, human clients, colleagues, physical environment, public perceptions of shelter work, stigmatization of shelter work, management, policies, impact
of stress, coping responses, sources of support, work-home conflict, and career development. Participants were free to elaborate and expand on topics related to their experience of stress that were not included in the interview prompts, however all participants received prompting to speak about all categories of stress covered in the interview schedule. The interview ended with another open-ended question asking whether there was anything else that we should know about stress in animal shelter work.

2.4. Data analysis

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the constant comparison method in order to identify common themes within each category of interest. Themes were identified if they were mentioned by a total of three or more participants. The program NVIVO was used to assist in the data analysis. To ensure inter-rater reliability, 10% (n=79) of the 791 total items extracted from the transcripts were randomly selected and coded by a third party. Inter-rater agreement reached 98% indicating high reliability for the categories identified.
CHAPTER 3

Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

The study sample consisted of 22 employees from seven physical animal shelters located in Ontario, Canada and in the North and Southeastern United States. These shelters included three humane societies, three municipal animal shelters, and one private animal shelter. The labeling of shelters by euthanasia policy (i.e. no-kill, kill) is complicated by discrepancies between, and among, shelter workers and the public in terms of the true meaning and consequences of these labels. However, in keeping with the popular terminology, and acknowledging the limitations of the information it provides, none of the shelters in this study identified as no-kill. Therefore, all participants were exposed to the practice of euthanasia in their workplace.

Participant ages ranged from 22 to 58 years with a mean age of 38.45. All participants identified as female and Caucasian. Seven participants were in management or supervisory positions and the remaining 15 were in non-managerial positions. The specific position titles held by participants were highly varied. Nineteen participants reported being full-time employees and three as part-time. The mean salary for the full sample was $36,500 with a range of $8,000 to $100,000 (see Table 2). When the part-time employees were removed the mean salary became $39,947.37 with a range of $12,000 to $100,000.
Table 2.

Salary Distribution

3.2. Occupational Stressors

Qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interview data revealed 17 categories of shelter work that participants reported as contributing to their individual experience of workplace strain. Due to the nature of the interview the resulting data were obtained through both spontaneous comments by participants as well as responses to direct questions contained within the interview checklist (see Appendix C). The categories that emerged were: Physical Environment, Exposure to Risks and Hazards, Responsibility for Staff, Scheduling and Vacation time, Work Load, Volume of Animals, Career Development, Volunteers, Financial Health of Shelter, Management and Policy Issues, Work Relationships, Public Perception, Responsibility for Life, Human Clients, Euthanasia Issues, Animal Relationship Stressors, and the Work-Home Interface. These categories were then organized according to the classification system described
in the introduction. Those categories identified as generic occupational stressors were further classified into either job characteristics and nature of the work, social and organization context of the work, or individual related stressors. Although the categories were identified as generic, the themes that emerged within these categories encompassed both generic and animal shelter specific occupational concerns and will be labeled as such. The categories that did not fit within the classification system were considered animal shelter specific occupational stressors and as such the themes that emerged were inherently shelter specific.

3.2.1. Generic Occupational Stressors: Job Characteristics and Nature of the Work

3.2.1.1. Physical environment. Thirteen participants from six different animal shelters described elements of their shelter’s physical environment as contributing to individual strain. The following themes emerged within this category: Concerns about the physical layout of the workplace; lack of space in the workplace; and noise levels. Although these themes fit within the physical environment category, which is generally accepted as a generic stressor category in the occupational stress literature, the participants’ responses revealed both generic and shelter specific concerns.

3.2.1.1.1. Physical layout of the workplace. The most common theme, reported by nine of the 13 participants, concerned aspects of the physical layout of the shelter that contributed to their experience of strain. These participants spoke about the issues they have encountered working in shelters with open concept layouts. They described lacking any private space for staff to talk to colleagues or a manager, have a private phone conversation, vent to colleagues, cry, grieve, or process emotions. One participant described having no option but to go to her car to cry and “decompress” after an emotional incident at work. They also noted having no private
space to take grieving patrons or to deal with irate patrons. One participant described this lack of private space as leading to “uncomfortable situations” occurring in the front lobby area. Other individual participants described the location of their euthanasia room as contributing to strain as it opened up into the infirmary allowing the sounds of conversation and laughter to penetrate during euthanasia. One participant explained that because their euthanasia room was only accessible through the infirmary, where policy does not allow patrons, she would have to inform patrons that they would not be allowed to accompany their animals during their last moments.

*Shelter specific concerns.*

Another stress I have is the open concept. I don’t like open concept for office space. That’s extremely stressful because just trying to have conversation with somebody in private, whether they’re a grieving person or a staff member that’s upset about something or just want to vent, it’s very difficult in our environment to do that because it’s open concept. (Andrea)

Just to decompress and sometimes you just need to release some of that emotion and there have been times when I’ve just been so overwhelmed I needed to cry. I remember one time ... there was literally nowhere for me to go so I just asked someone to cover and I went and cried in my car. But you know, that’s not ideal. It would be good to have somewhere to go. And even having a private conversation, even on the phone, you can’t do it. There’s no privacy. (Trudi)

Our euthanasia room is so small and it’s right next to the infirmary ... so people who bring their animals in aren’t allowed to be with them until the end. In a new environment or a different shelter environment I would definitely have a euthanasia room where patrons can be there with their animals as they are put down because it’s nice to say that our staff stayed with the dog or stayed with the cat and made sure it knows it’s loved when it dies, and that’s true, we do that, but there’s no way that we’re going to be there in the way that the dog’s owner for 15 years is going to be there. So I think that adds stress in general because first of all, it takes workers, like kennel staff, away from what they’re doing to spend time with these dogs but secondly, the people who come in, you can feel it, you can feel their disappointment when they realize they can’t be with their dog until the end. (Leslie)

Three participants, from three different shelters, also noted that the design of their dog kennels contributed to strain; kennels that allow the dogs to “look but not touch” the other dogs (e.g. through clear plexiglass or chain-link between individual kennels) increases their reactivity
and a lack of guillotine doors requires employees to more often resort to the use of the dog pole when moving dogs between quarantine and a clean kennel.

*Shelter specific concerns.*

I think a better design that took into account the needs of the animals, would also make it less stressful on the animals and on the people. (Andrea)

I would say just the fact that the dogs don’t have the outdoor runs. They’re never off leash because we don’t even have an outdoor enclosure for them to run in whereas all the other shelters do. I think that’s the only stressful thing in regards to the layout. I guess one other thing is in our dog quarantine room for biting, aggressive dogs, like I said, if they won’t walk over into a clean kennel we have to use a dog pole. Well, a guillotine door could potentially solve that problem where you can slide it up and they walk across and you don’t have to touch the dog. We don’t have guillotine doors and when they made this building they didn’t ask any front line workers about their ideas with regards to kennels and stuff like that. (Anna)

Well the back of our kennels are typical chain-link kennels and they create, I’m sure it’s the same thing in every shelter, a reactive dog has more chances to be reactive because he’ll see 10 or 12 dogs down the line and occasionally a dog will, especially a young dog that’s very energetic, that has a lot of pent up energy in a kennel, if they’re dog aggressive they’ll want to attack the other dog while we’re taking them out for enrichment and then because they can’t get to that other dog they will turn and redirect on the humans. So then you’re at risk of being bit by the dog, you could be jumped on and injured. So it’s very stressful … The can see and not touch builds reactivity, it creates a situation where dogs get frustrated and the frustration leads to inappropriate behaviours. (Lauren)

3.2.1.1.2. *Lack of space in the workplace.* Seven of the 13 participants reported a lack of space in their workplace as contributing to strain. These participants explained that multiple employees having to share small office spaces resulted in strain due to increased noise, negatively affecting their ability to concentrate. Lack of sufficient office space resulted in increased clutter, cramped areas, having no space for volunteers, and employees having to adjust their planned daily schedule based on if office space is available.

*Generic concerns.*

Also our office is basically like a closet; it’s really really small. My manager has her own
office but there’s three techs that work in the office plus we usually have a co-op student
or someone else helping and then we have a few animals in there and there’s no windows
in the office. It’s just really small and cramped. (Diane)

Space. Not enough space. There isn’t enough storage. There isn’t enough desk space.
There just isn’t enough space. (Andrea)

Participants also noted strain associated with a lack of space for the animals. They
explained that this lack of space results in the overcrowding of animals, for example, placing
three or four dogs in a kennel designed for one animal, which in turn increases the level of noise
in the shelter. The lack of cage space for incoming animals often resulted in staff having to work
overtime hours to find appropriate temporary space for the animals. One participant explained
that in her shelter a lack of space can also influence euthanasia decisions; when space is at a
premium less serious health and temperament issues that at other times would be treated could be
considered cause for euthanasia.

Shelter specific concerns.

Our shelter was not designed to hold as many animals as it did so lots of stuff was very
makeshift. You know, there were pens propped up in places wherever you could put
them, there was 3 or 4 dogs in kennels designed to hold one animal, and it was just
pervasively, all the time, loud. (Judith)

We’ve got cats coming in and we’ve got to make room for them so you’ve got to
euthanize. If it was in February it might not have been euthanized but because it’s June
[high volume season] they’re euthanized. (Karen)

3.2.1.1.3. Noise levels. Five of the 13 participants spoke about high levels of noise as
contributing to strain in their workplace. They described working in pervasively loud
environments, with animal noises echoing off of concrete and metal surfaces. One participant,
who worked at the front desk, described the noise from the open concept public areas and office
space as hindering her ability to communicate effectively over the phone. The participants
described the noise as limiting their ability to have “real conversations” with colleagues and patrons and often requiring them to communicate by raising their voices.

_SHELTER SPECIFIC CONCERNS._

Oh my god, it was so unbelievably loud … it was just pervasively, all the time, loud. All the time barking which of course echoed because everything was concrete and metal. (Judith)

You can’t have a real conversation inside so I think that probably also contributed to the smoking thing because you could run behind the building where you could actually have a face to face conversation with somebody. And everything you said to somebody else was yelling because you had to and so you’re constantly screaming at other people which I think lends itself to having loud, vocal, boisterous, people on the job, which contributes to the amount that people are stressed. (Judith)

Noise is a huge problem. I frequently can’t hear what people are saying on the phone. And considering that one of my jobs is dispatching out officers to animals in distress, that’s really difficult because everyone will be talking around and I know that somebody desperately needs my help and it’s more important than anything else around me and I can’t hear them. (Trudi)

3.2.1.2. EXPOSURE TO RISKS AND HAZARDS. Seven participants from four different animal shelters described experiencing strain associated with exposure to risks and hazards on the job. The themes that emerged within this category included: Aggressive and unpredictable human clients; and aggressive and dangerous animals. Although these themes fit within the exposure to risks and hazards category, which is generally accepted as a generic stressor category in the occupational stress literature, the participants’ responses within both themes described shelter specific concerns.

3.2.1.2.1. AGGRESSIVE AND UNPREDICTABLE HUMAN CLIENTS. The most common theme, reported by five of the seven participants, involved a fear for personal safety when dealing with aggressive and unpredictable human clients. They spoke about receiving threats of physical violence, clients showing up with weapons, and frequent verbal abuse, particularly when
working at the front desk. The situations in which participants appeared to view human clients as threatening typically occurred when clients refused to pay fees to pick up their dog or take it “very personally” when refused an adoption request. One participant explained that when repeat offenders, whose dogs are frequently found loose and brought to the shelter, are known to be aggressive she will alert the police to be on standby. None of the five participants appeared confident with their shelter’s standard procedure when dealing with threatening clients.

_Shelter specific concerns._

And then there’s the stress and worry, in some cases, of, “Ok, now what are they going to do” if they didn’t get their way and they’re obviously worked up and you haven’t been able to defuse them so where’s that going? Are you going to have to call a code red, which is shut down the shelter, lock all the doors, and barricade everybody into a space? Are you going to have to call 911 and have them physically removed? (Andrea)

The individual actually whipped something at my head and I had to duck and move out of the way because I didn’t know whether or not the person was going to come across the front desk at me because at that point it looked like they might. (Andrea)

In the past we’ve had a couple of different individuals who come in on a regular basis and seem either mentally unbalanced or threatening of violence. So we do have a ridiculous process for when we feel like we’re in danger where we have to announce a code over the paging system and then people are supposed to come running, but our busiest day, when I’ve dealt with the most crazies, would be Saturdays, and no one’s in there except me...meaning a higher up. I’m as high as it gets on a Saturday so who am I calling? (Trudi)

Because I think people can be quite aggressive. And it doesn’t happen a lot but occasionally we refuse people for adoptions and you can imagine that when you have a shelter with 400 cats in it and we just told them they can’t have one, how personally some people take that. It’s like, “I’m sorry, you’re full of cats and I can’t have one of them?” That’s a big deal, so a lot of people do get pissed off at us. (Trudi)

We get aggressive people here. If we have their pets and they want it back and they either don’t have the money or they don’t have the proof that it’s their pet and so we can’t give it back to them until it’s been dealt with the supervisor so we’ve had...I think there’s been people with guns here before. We’ve had the police on scene here several times because we knew an aggressive person was going to be coming in because we had their pet; there are repeat dogs that we get in so we know, “Ok great we better get the police here on standby because we know this guy’s going to flip out.” (Anna)
When you work for a vet it’s a business so they come to you and some of them can be downright rude but it’s totally different here; it’s like they own us so we have to do whatever they want and some of them can be... Spitting, yelling, screaming, one guy threatened to drive through the front window if we didn’t give him his dog. (Karen)

### 3.2.1.2.2. Aggressive and dangerous animals.

Four of the seven participants spoke about strain associated with handling dangerous animals. They described being afraid to get in the kennel with aggressive dogs but also feeling stressed when having to use a dog pole (i.e. a long metal or plastic tube handle with a retractable wire loop at the end) which the dogs tend to be afraid of. One participant also explained that she felt strain when having to explain to members of the public why certain aggressive animals are being handled by staff with a dog pole and are not available for adoption. Two participants noted these safety issues were particularly stressful when housing dogs long-term on a court order. Finally, one participant expressed concern about how physically isolated some rooms in her shelter are. She wondered how she would get other staff’s attention if she were in trouble with a dog, particularly considering the lack of security cameras or emergency pagers at her shelter.

_Shelter specific concerns._

The dog was quite aggressive to the point where I was not comfortable getting in the kennel with it nor was any other staff. There’s a lot of people very uncomfortable with this dog and based on the previous behaviour that the owner had mentioned as well as the behaviour in the kennel, and the aggression was directed at people, the majority of the group felt it was appropriate to euthanize the dog. (Sarah)

We house dogs that are under court order for being extremely aggressive and the owner thinks that they want this dog back so they get a lawyer and the dog has to live here for one to two years. That dog is not allowed to go outside. We’re not allowed to touch the dog. We hope that it has a nice temperament that when we open up the kennel door it will walk across to a new clean kennel. If that’s not the case then a dog stick has to be used and a lot of the dogs are terrified of that dog stick so I very infrequently use the dog stick. I will try every other angle to get the dog to walk into a clean kennel on its own. Without touching it because that’s too dangerous. (Anna)
A lot of the animal rooms are quite isolated unless someone happens to walk by and see you so if there was a problem in one of the animal rooms, either because they’re not that visible or, in the case of the dog room, if they all get to barking and somebody is freaking out on you then you’re not necessarily going to know. Same as, if you were stuck in a room with one of the dogs there also is that potential stress too of being able to get someone’s attention to let them know if you’re in trouble. (Andrea)

3.2.1.3. **Responsibility for staff.** Five participants, out of the total of seven managers and supervisors involved in the study, and coming from three different animal shelters, identified feelings of responsibility for their staff as a stressor. The following themes emerged within this category: Responsibility for emotional reactions of staff; and responsibility for the safety of staff. Although these themes fit within the responsibility for staff category, which describes a generic organizational role stressor, the participants’ responses revealed only shelter specific concerns.

3.2.1.3.1. **Responsibility for emotional reactions of staff.** The most common theme within the responsibility for staff category, endorsed by four participants, was feeling responsible for the emotional reactions of staff to both management’s decisions about the lives of animals and to daily workplace strain. Respondents spoke about the difficulty involved in seeing how hard their employees have worked with a particular animal, and how emotionally invested they’ve become, and then ultimately how emotionally affected they are by a management decision to euthanize that animal. These participants described the responsibility they feel to provide their staff emotional support through these difficult decisions as emotionally overwhelming and in some cases more difficult than the actual euthanasia.

*Shelter specific concerns.*

When that dog came in I made the decision that it wasn’t going back up for adoption because of the severity of the bite and that we were going to euthanize that dog. That upset a lot of people. I felt bad for the dog but I felt worse for the staff, because I know that they didn’t like my decision and everyone had worked so hard years ago to get this
dog to come around. That’s more stressful than the actual euthanasia of the dog. (Susan)

Then there’s the emotional end of explaining that to the volunteers and taking on their emotional distress over it. And even staff. For example, with the dog trainers that are a part of my department, if there’s a failure to be able to move forward on a dog for whatever reason, or something happens, then it’s providing the support to that person. I have to be the strength because that’s my role and I can find that sometimes emotionally overwhelming because you want to be a support to them and you can’t necessarily say things that are going to make them feel better but you try. (Andrea)

It was difficult to have my staff, who were so invested and my ultimately having to be the one to make that decision. So it’s very difficult for me to be causing them these feelings as well...I’m not causing them...I don’t think anybody really thinks I’m making any decisions that are inappropriate but I have to be able to stand back and say ‘this isn’t safe, we can’t do this’ and give people an opportunity to say their goodbyes and deal with volunteers who become invested in the animals and trying to support and help them understand. So I’m sure some of my anxiety is related to work. (Mary)

3.2.1.3.2. Responsibility for safety of staff. Three of the five participants expressed concern for the safety of their staff. They spoke about feeling worried when sending staff into risky situations, be it unpredictable field work or kennel work with an aggressive dog, and a concern for their staff’s general health, for example, during an extended heat wave in summer, that becomes overwhelming when combined with concern for the animals.

Shelter specific concerns.

It’s also stressful putting staff in some situation where you don’t necessarily want them to be. So for example, this is coming from the reinforcement aspect of it, so we received a call from the police department, they have a warrant, because they know the person that they’re going to get has guns, or drugs in their home but that they also have other animals. They don’t know what kind of animals so you’re putting staff in a situation where they know that they’re going in to get animals but they have no idea what they are. Is it venomous, is it poisonous, is it dangerous, are they dogs, cats, snakes, lizards, whatever. (Susan)

Most of the time since I’m not working with the animals I don’t worry so much for myself but I do worry for the trainers for example. So I’m constantly reminding them if you’re working with a dog that does anything that could be risky then we should be doing it in twos, we should not be doing it as a single because if you get into trouble you got to get out of trouble. (Andrea)
3.2.1.4. Scheduling and vacation time. Eleven participants from five different shelter locations described scheduling and vacation time as stressors. The following themes emerged within this category: Guilt when taking time off; and untraditional work schedules. Although these themes fit within the scheduling and vacation time category, with scheduling being generally accepted as a stressor category in the generic occupational stress literature, the participants’ responses revealed both generic and shelter specific concerns.

3.2.1.4.1. Guilt when taking time off. A common theme within the scheduling and vacation time category, reported by five of the 11 participants, was an experience of guilt when taking vacation time, sick days, or personal days, due to both the extra work coworkers would be left with and a concern that the animals would not receive as much care and attention in their absence.

Shelter specific concerns.

Because there’s only two paid staff, someone, I feel, and this is the wrong way to feel, my boss is always telling me not to feel this way, but I feel someone always has to be there and oftentimes I feel really guilty for taking off. In fact last year when it came time to, you know, role my vacation days over, I had 2 ½ weeks of vacation days I haven’t even used because I felt so guilty taking off. (Nicole)

I don’t do it a lot because if I call in sick everybody else has to step up and I know the animals won’t get cleaned as well. (Carol)

But part of it is I don’t like taking time off because if there’s a dog there that I know has a good relationship with me I don’t like knowing that they’d possibly go a day without getting attention. So I actually kind of dread taking a day off or getting sick. (Lauren)

If I have a cold or if I’m just not feeling well I usually still come in because I would just feel too bad leaving...I feel a little bit bad leaving my co-workers with more work but I feel really badly leaving a lot of the dogs with less time out of their kennel. (Lauren)
3.2.1.4.2. **Untraditional work schedules.** Five of the 11 participants, from three different shelter locations, described untraditional work schedules as a stressor. This included being on-call, that is, being required as part of their job description to always be available by phone. They explained that this type of scheduling means that they are “never away from work” and that they can “never really relax.” One said that being on-call has negatively impacted her family relationships, both in terms of her being absent for important events and a sense from family members that she is never fully present with them. She also reported sleeping an average of three hours per night, which she believes may, at least in part, be associated with her schedule. Participants also responded that long hours and different schedules every week make it difficult to commit and engage in non-work related hobbies and activities including exercise.

*Generic concerns.*

You didn’t get a lunch break and you worked such long hours that you didn’t have time to exercise and on your day off you certainly weren’t out hiking...you were doing the things you could only do on your one day off out of the week. (Judith)

It never ends, and then I’ll come home and I’ll be home for like 10 minutes and then the phone’s ringing and it’s [the shelter]. I’ll come home, and part of the problem is I tend to...well I kind of have to...take work home with me because I’m on call. So we’ll be trying to have a dinner and the phone’s ringing ... You can’t really relax. (Eva)

There’s no human way possible that you can be in two places at once and you feel guilty because you’re not in one place. There has been a couple times I got so ticked I didn’t answer the phone. And then I feel bad and a half hour later I call back because maybe something’s really wrong. (Eva)

I don’t have time because of the hours. Our schedule’s always different so I don’t want to go into a[n] [activity] and not be able to make half the classes. A lot of things aren’t open by the time I get home and I have to spend some time with my kids. (Jessica)

I get called frequently after hours and on my days off, or texted, or emailed; I’m never not really working. My mind is never totally away from it. (Mary)
3.2.1.5. **Work load.** Eleven participants, from four different shelter locations, identified workload as a stressor in shelter work. The sole theme that emerged within this category was quantitative overload. Participants’ responses in this category described generic occupational stress concerns.

3.2.1.5.1. **Quantitative overload.** Ten out of the 11 participants described experiencing quantitative overload. As discussed in the introduction, quantitative overload occurs when an employee perceives themselves as having too much work to do than can be accomplished in the set amount of time allotted. These 10 participants described having too many responsibilities to achieve during their workday. Notably, these participants appeared to find this stressful because of the perceived negative impact on the quality of care they were able to offer the animals. For example, they described not having enough time to accomplish what they wanted to in a workday to feel comfortable going home and did not attribute overwork to unreasonable demands from management. Although none of the participants blamed the workload on management, some did suggest that understaffing contributed to the problem.

*Generic concerns.*

Too much to do and not enough time to do it in...even remotely ... it’s the feeling that you could have done it better but you did the best that you could but there’s still that stress about not being able to do it the way you would’ve liked to. (Andrea)

Frustration because I can’t get enough of it done to be able to walk away from it. (Andrea)

We do a 10 hour shift. A lot us don’t take our...we have basically an hour and 20 minutes when we count all our break and our half hour lunch. Most of us don’t take the breaks because we’re still doing the animals so we’ll just work right through it. (Jessica)

… Most people are doing the job of a few people and most people are sort of at the end of their tether. So everybody is doing everything they can and things are still not getting done. So it’s hard on all of us because we’re all under a lot of stress to perform. (Trudi)
Right now I feel like I have no time to actually get anything done from start to finish at one particular time. (Ingrid)

So being able to have all this knowledge and not be able to fix a lot of the things I want to fix is a lot of where my frustration comes in because I can’t make more of me and I’m only there for so many hours. That is probably my biggest frustration. (Wendy)

3.2.2. Generic Occupational Stressors: Social and Organizational Context of Work

3.2.2.1. Career development. As discussed in the introduction, career development as a stressor can include concerns about job insecurity, under- or over-promotion, career stagnation, and unsatisfactory remuneration. In total, seven participants, from four different shelter locations, described experiencing strain associated with stressors that fall under the category of career development. The sole theme that emerged within this category was unsatisfactory remuneration. All participant responses within this category described generic occupational stress concerns.

3.2.2.1.1. Unsatisfactory remuneration. Six of the seven participants with responses that fell under the career development category described unsatisfactory remuneration as a stressor. They all acknowledged that their pay was lower than they would prefer and several implied that this aspect of their job made shelter work either unsustainable as a career choice for them in the long-term or even impossible to consider without the support of a partner’s income or a second job.

Generic concerns.

It didn’t pay for anything; you don’t make any money. It’s certainly a job, not a career, definitely. (Judith)

There is no way I’d be able to afford being on my own at the pay rate I get, so I don’t understand how they expect to keep staff. They get all upset when they’re running short on staff, it’s like, well, the staff is not happy so they are leaving. (Nicole)
I haven’t been paid this little since high school and if I wasn’t married I would never be able to do it. So that’s why most people who work there either have a second income to help support them or they’re so young that they’re still living with their parents. There’s very few of us who are older and more established that can afford to work at that pay. (Trudi)

As far as pay goes, I’ve been there for six years, and only made a $2.00 raise. But I hear things, well, it’s actually factual; they hired somebody recently at the same pay rate that I’m making, and I’ve been here six years. So I just feel like...really? That’s when I start getting really ticked off. (Nicole)

One participant described the pay as part of the reasoning behind her decision to leave her shelter job for a higher paying job despite enjoying the work.

I personally wouldn’t want to [move up]. It’s a part-time job for me. Again, I love it there but obviously it’s a non-profit and it doesn’t pay very well and I have close to no life because of it. I want my weekends back and I’d be getting higher pay. I mean, it is my animal fix and I love seeing animals go home and I love knowing I helped make that happen but realistically it’s the one job I’d have to let go of. (Leslie)

Four respondents balanced their concerns about their salary with their concern for the animals.

It can be busy and sometimes you can feel underappreciated I guess. But I think that’s with everyone that works for the shelter just because you don’t make much money but again you’re working for a charity and it’s more of a love for what you’re doing than a paycheck. (Diane)

3.2.2.2. Volunteers. Four participants, from two different shelter locations, identified working with volunteers as a stressor on the job. The sole theme that emerged within this category was frustration with standards not being enforced with volunteers. Participants responses within this category included both generic and shelter specific concerns.

3.2.2.2.1. Standards not enforced. Three out of the four participants in the volunteers category expressed frustration that standards are not always enforced with volunteers and that volunteers seemingly cannot be fired. They suggested that this places both the volunteer and
animals at risk of harm and takes up valuable employee time.

*Generic concerns.*

So we have to follow certain protocols here and I wish there was a way to monitor that and have a consequence if you refuse to comply or if you cannot comply. And that for some reason is a taboo subject… You can’t do that to volunteers, but I’m like, “Why?” I was a candy striper, if I didn’t [follow the rules] they’d fire me. (Amanda)

Another part of the conflict is volunteers because we have employees at the front desk but every once in a while we’ll have a volunteer come in that we have to train and it’s difficult not to get frustrated with them, especially if they’ve been there for a little while already and they’re still asking really stupid questions. Like there’s this one new volunteer who started two months ago and she’s still asking really simple questions about really simple things, she’s still using her cheat sheet and because of that it takes her 50 minutes to do an adoption instead of 20. So that can be very frustrating especially on a really busy day. (Leslie)

Like, for “You’re not working quick enough” they won’t fire them. They’ll just say, “Okay we’ll just make sure they only stick with this one thing that they know” but then still, they’re just taking up space. And I feel mean saying it but it’s true. (Leslie)

*Shelter specific concerns.*

The standards are there somewhere but no, we don’t require they uphold the standards. And some of [the mistakes] are egregious, you know, some of them result in bites. Or even just scary situations; one dog needs to be walked on a chain leash because she loves to climb up her leash when she gets really excited. She’s a great dog but she will climb her leash and driving into work I literally pulled over onto the lawn because I was watching a volunteer and the dog was just climbing her leash and all the woman kept doing was picking her arms up and swinging them. (Amanda)

3.2.2.3. **Financial health of shelter.** Four participants, from four different animal shelters, spoke about the financial health of their shelter as contributing to their individual experiences of workplace strain. The sole theme that emerged within this category was limited organizational funding with a variety of repercussions. Participant responses within this category described shelter specific concerns.
3.2.2.3.1. **Limited organizational funding.** The responses of all four participants within the financial health of shelter category spoke about how limited funding can permeate all aspects of their work. They explained that limited funds often lead to having to make difficult decisions about which animals will receive medical treatment and that working with “bare bones” materials can lead to feelings of guilt. One participant explained that her awareness of the limited funds in her shelter made it frustrating to see money being spent in areas that she viewed as less urgent; for example, on IT updates when staff is not “paid what they should.” Finally, a participant spoke about limited funding leading to less flexibility in terms of surrendering fees for those clients who legitimately cannot afford them but have reasonable grounds for having to give up their animal. She described experiencing an inner conflict because reducing the fee would mean less money for the shelter, making it more difficult to provide quality care for the animals currently in care, while on the other hand, refusing a client who cannot afford a surrender fee may be viewed as turning away an animal in need of a new home; going against the raison d’etre of many shelter workers.

*SHELTER SPECIFIC CONCERNS.*

I think that those types of decisions, when you’re that young and impressionable, put a lot of stress on you and leaving the shelter everyday knowing that, “Ok I’ve got 60 puppies with parvo right now and I have four bottles of antibiotics because we can’t afford anymore and there’s not enough to go around”…that is unbelievable stress. (Judith)

There’s just not enough money, not enough medicine to go around for everybody and you just sort of deal with the bare bones of it and so having to take that home with you, the guilt of that was very difficult. (Judith)

3.2.2.4. **Management and policy issues.** Seventeen participants, from six different shelter locations, described the management of their shelter and shelter policies as contributing to individual strain. The following themes emerged within this category: A disconnect between
management and front-line workers; specific policies and their implementation; and communication between management and front line workers. Participant responses within this category described both generic and shelter specific concerns.

3.2.2.4.1. **Disconnect between management and front-line workers.** Twelve of the 17 participants perceived a large disconnect between management and front-line workers in terms of values, goals, and respect. Generally, front-line workers reported feeling that management, and in particular the Board of Directors, were out of touch with what happens in the shelter and, more specifically, what it is like working directly with the animals on a daily basis. They felt that the more business-minded goals of management and the Board of Directors clashed at times with the participants’ animal-focused goals. Front-line workers reported feeling frustrated that they are not consulted, and that their opinions are not respected, in terms of the creation of policies that they will ultimately have to carry out themselves.

**Shelter specific concerns.**

The owners [of the shelter] were very holistically minded, which is fine, but they were overly so and they had a lot of bizarre policies on medications and treatment protocol for sick animals. Like, not wanting to use harsh chemicals to clean the kennels, trying to go to organic alternatives, things like that that we could plainly see weren’t working...they plainly did not care. That was very difficult and I think a lot of animals suffered directly from that especially now being in a world where any amount of veterinary medicines are at my fingertips, I can definitely see that there’s a lot more lives that could’ve easily been corrected and they died of things that could have been fixed, cured, that type of thing. (Judith)

The past few years we’ve had terrible, terrible management, so, it sometimes becomes employees vs. management trying to save animals, you know, when you are working against the people you work with. It’s a lot less stressful when everyone’s on the same page, even in the case when we have to euthanize animals, it would be a lot less stressful. (Mallory)

I find working with the board however can be really really really difficult and frustrating.
I understand why they have to be there and I understand why it happens. The problem is that you’re bringing in a bunch of people who are not animal people. They’re business people, they’re whoever they are in the world out there and they’re coming to the table with their own points of view which is perfectly fine but without a basic understanding about why things need to be done a certain way. (Andrea)

I mean it’s the upper management that’s always stressful with them coming down...like you have justifiable reasons why this animal shouldn’t go to a home and they just say, “Well we have to send the dog home with them.” They say, “Well, we have to please the tax-payers” and that’s all I ever hear which is ridiculous. Yeah they don’t care. They just want them out the door. They just say, “Get them out the door and don’t worry about where they go.” (Carol)

[Management] doesn’t care. They’re still going to say no anyway. And I know it flows downhill, like it’s their managers that are telling them, but then why are their managers telling them to do something when they’ve never even stepped foot in the shelter and never worked in a shelter a day in their life. They have no idea how we work in a shelter, they have no idea what it feels to stick a needle in an animal’s heart, you know, it’s just things like that. They make decisions based on numbers and then that’s it. (Carol)

That’s the thing that makes it very stressful too, because things come down from the vet and supervisors and then you have the staff who don’t necessarily agree with the decisions but are the ones who actually do the euthanizing. (Erin)

If you have to euthanize for space you have to euthanize for space. But then you need to call it what it is. And sometimes when it’s an actual difference of opinion I do feel, not all the time, but sometimes depending on who the vet is, depending on what the situation is, that the people who handle the animal the most are the last ones to be actually listened to. (Erin)

The supervisor will ask [a higher level employee] their opinion, but this person’s never touched the dog so I’m thinking, “How can they have an opinion or voice an opinion on an animal they’ve never touched?” That doesn’t sit well with me either. It’s like take all the people who are actually involved with the dog, take all their information, the vets information, your information, and make a logical decision; what are we doing with this dog? (Jessica)

I think we should be able to say no [to potential adoptees]. We know this dog, we know it wouldn’t do well in that environment. It’s basically not good enough, I guess, to say no to a person. So people who make these policies, they’re the ones sitting in their office and they’re just, “This dog can go wherever” and it hurts me when I see them come back because it’s hard on the dog. They go out, they come back. (Jessica)
[Management] can be definitely [be a source of stress]. I think anywhere it can be. Our management doesn’t necessarily, they work in offices, they do a lot of our public stuff, they interact with the public and all that, but they’ll see snapshots in time of a dog, or just of us, and not know what we’re seeing, and I think that’s the biggest contributing factor to the stress with them. (Lauren)

Generic concerns.

You’re either a private shelter like mine, that’s run by ... some wealthy pious woman with too much money to blow or you’re run by the government who especially doesn’t care. So either way you’re not going to get anywhere with your opinions because either the management has worked there long enough to have been deemed management and they’re so broken by the system that they’ve either come to the, “Don’t care” point of view or they’ve just started to try to block it out or it’s run, like I said, by the altruistic, “Come on guys, everybody pull up your bootstraps and let’s fix it,” but it’s such an unrealistic viewpoint. So yeah, managerial is rough and that seems to be a universal thing as well. (Judith)

We had a changeover in the board of directors; we had someone come in as a president who is very much corporate, so all of a sudden there’s a lot more paper-work, peer reviews, I wish I could think of more, but it’s like, I didn’t do that for 20 years and all of a sudden, boom. I can’t even explain it. It just kind of makes me laugh though because I feel like a lot of it’s just busy paper work when there’s so many other things. Like bell work, I don’t know if you know what bell work is, but when you were in school as a kid it was something you did before you started classes; it was busy work. And that’s kind of how I feel that a lot of that stuff is and it’s like, “Oh my god it’s one more thing.” (Ingrid)

We’ve had staff meetings with just the adoptions staff but I’ve noticed that in a lot of those meetings they ask for ideas but they’re not open to everything. So someone will give an idea and they’ll say, “Well no, not that.” I watched it happen with a friend of mine who was working there last year and he gave an idea and they said no, and he gave another one, and another one, and they just kept saying no instead of, “Can you expand on that” or “Can you work on that.” They just kind of said no. They would just turn it down. So I think there are opportunities for my voice to be heard but not necessarily heeded. (Leslie)

I think that there are a lot of things that are expressed [to management] that go on deaf ears and a lot of really good suggestions come up [from] a lot of really important people there who have an [understanding of] how that shelter runs and functions, and I think that a lot of that is just ignored and for whatever reason I’m not sure. And sometimes I’m not sure, I’m sitting there thinking, “Why do they think this is a bad idea,” and they just don’t do anything about it. (Nicole)
I’ve met the chair of the board and the treasurer of the board and the rest of them I’ve never met because they don’t set foot in the shelter during business hours. I happen to be friends with someone on the board and that person once mentioned to me that sometimes in board meetings conversation will get around to how staff are the problem at the shelter and when I learned that I almost lost my shit. Are you kidding me, the only thing that goes right at that shelter is the staff...like that’s the best thing. If the staff left, they’d be screwed. So that just showed me how out of it they are. I believe that managers and board members should have to work a day in the life of each person in the shelter to have some idea of the volumes and the issues that we deal with, because the rules are coming down from people who have no idea what it’s like. (Trudi)

You can say all you want and then they just go, “Well this is how it is. This is our policy.” (Carol)

3.2.2.4.2. Specific policies and their implementation. Nine of the 17 participants reported that specific policies and their implementation contributed to their experience of strain. They explained that it is stressful when they do not understand the reasoning behind a specific policy or when they simply do not agree with a policy. These participants reported feeling that policies were sometimes created at the whim of management without considering the input of front line workers. They also reported finding it stressful when management would act against the same policies they created or make unpredictable exceptions or sudden changes to policies without communicating the reasoning to front line workers.

Shelter specific.

I would say that sometimes the management of the shelter can be really stressful. It’s already enough that we are dealing with people who feel entitled to get any animal that they want but sometimes we have superior staff members trying to make exceptions for people, changing the rules, adding rules. I’d say that’s probably the most stressful thing for me because there is no consistency in it. (Leslie)

I think some of the shelter policies can be a little difficult to understand or agree with … Where I become upset is when the staff that are higher up like our director or our head vet or something like that breaks one of those rules or policies and it’s OK. It’s one of those do as I say not as I do kind of things. I thought we were not doing that and then they go
ahead and do it. It’s all a case by case, animal by animal basis, I suppose they’re just making the best decisions they can at the time, but it’s still, it still can get a little sketchy. (Nicole)

We’ve pretty much done away with all policies related to adopters. We used to have the standards that people had to meet in order to adopt an animal. We now pretty much give anyone a dog if they ask for, no matter how much they suck ... We’re not supposed to say no to anybody anymore ... so I can’t tell you how many dogs we’ve had come back because, you know, just recently we sent home a biting dog with a family of little kids, and it was back in a couple days, because it bit the kid. Because the people insisted that they knew better. So, management won’t let us tell them no, which is insane just from a liability standpoint. (Mallory)

You are filling up the paperwork, signing off your name on it to approve [the adoption], and you think what a waste of my time it is, why am I even bothering because it’s not using my knowledge or my experience to actually make a good placement. It’s just having to rubber stamp something that I think is a bad idea, some of them are so bad that every now and then you refuse to even sign off on it, you say well, it’s just so bad I can’t even approve it, if management thinks it’s a great home and then they can sign off on it. (Mallory)

We don’t have a clear policy. The policy is whomever happens to be working that day. Honestly, under the shelter manager is the kennel manager, and the assistant kennel manager, and both of them, it’s their whim of the day. There is no policy. A dangerous dog will be euthanized. But as far as beyond that, it is the whim of whomever is in charge that day. (Mallory)

I think the adoption policies are a little bit random and there needs to be a little more faith put in the staff members hands. Those adoption counsellors, it’s in their best interest to adopt out animals, that’s what they want to do. But in some circumstances they need to be able to say no when all points point to this person is not going to treat the animal in the way we want it treated. (Trudi)

Some of our animals don’t move very quickly so you’ll have the animal up for adoption for three months or something, you finally get it out, you know it’s probably not going to be a good home, but we can’t really do a lot about it unfortunately because of politics. This happened twice, we have two dogs sitting back there, they were adopted to not right homes, they’ve come back, and the owners said they bit them. [Now] we cannot legally adopt out that dog even though they’re great dogs, so you either have to try to get rescues and rescues are always full or you can try other outlets but in the end it might be euthanasia. (Carol)

I don’t think anybody should stay in a shelter for 30 years, like I think they just get stuck
in a rut and just downright miserable. Some of the people are still perky and happy but other people, it’s just like, “The job is killing you.” And I think a lot of it has to do with all the euthanasias and the stress of, “And now we’re going to do this this way not this way” and we know that the way we were doing it was the right way but management says we have to do things a different way. And they just make calls, they don’t ask us. So they just change things and say, “This is how is going to be.” And we go, “Well why are you doing that?” and three months later they go, “Yeah that’s not working, we’re going to go back to this way again.” (Carol)

In their system for all their numbers, they took out the space option for when we euthanize an animal...we couldn’t say space, which is what we were euthanizing for, so we lie, essentially, and say sick or behaviour, but if there’s not something wrong with it and it’s not sick, yeah we’re euthanizing for space, but the public doesn’t like that, so they tried to hide it all ... Like you want to be able to [say], “Yeah, you know, we’re doing all this good stuff,” well, deep down, no, you’re being dirty, and lying and covering things up just to make the numbers look better. (Carol)

... Being a city run shelter, not being a charity, upper management feels that our responsibility is to the public so it’s kind of a, “Make the public happy at any cost” thing, so if someone comes in and wants this dog, we can try to deter them from it but we’re not allowed to outright say “No” ... So now we aren’t allowed to turn people down even if we know it’s not the right fit for them. (Erin)

Like say you get a big mastiff in here. That dog shouldn’t go to just Joe Blow that lives down the road. Let’s have them visit it a few times. Let’s have them interact with this dog. I find our adoptions policies very weak. Like, you come in, you meet the dog, sign the application, boom, it’s your dog. Can we not have them come back a few times and meet? But once again, “Let’s up our adoption numbers and decrease our euthanasia numbers.” That’s how I perceive it. Like people have come in and, “Oh what do I have to do to? How long does it take to get that dog?” Well basically once you fill out the application, you meet with someone and the dog’s yours that day. (Jessica)

3.2.2.4.3. Communication between management and front-line workers. Seven of the 17 participants with responses that fell within the management and policy issues category reported that communication issues between management and the front line contributed to strain. They reported a lack of opportunity to voice their opinions and minimal efforts at shelter-wide communication across departments, particularly on decisions that might emotionally impact
staff. One participant explained that insufficient communication can lead to inconsistent implementation of policies and therefore inconsistent care for the animals. These participants also described close, friendly relationships between managers and front-line workers as sometimes negatively impacting communication and contributing to strain. They explained that it is sometimes difficult for managers who are also friends to provide direct feedback and generally manage those below them, while front-line workers at times find it difficult to respect a manager who acts like a friend.

Generic concerns.

The departmental heads get together…god only knows what they talk about because I don’t. The departmental heads get together but we don’t have departmental meetings and I know that’s a source of concern for me and at least two of my colleagues in my position because this kind of stuff is important. (Amanda)

The director of the whole shelter… No one likes her. No one respects her and everyone talks about her behind her back and it kind of adds to the “Let’s not respect management” thing because if our managers and our supervisor are talking about her behind her back and saying she doesn’t know what she’s doing, I mean, it’s true, but it’s unprofessional to talk about that at work and so that kind of leads toward, “If they don’t respect her then why should I respect them?” (Leslie)

The one time that I went up to [the CEO] with a problem, that our shelter management had already said wasn’t her fault, wasn’t her issue, I went to the top woman, whose office is right there, and I was actually chastised for going there, and I told myself at that point, “Never again, I’m not going to try this again.” … So, our number one person doesn’t want to hear it, she says go to number two, and number two says, “It’s not my job.” (Mallory)

There are meetings but there’s a little bit like mommy just telling you what’s going on. There’s not really a give and take...you’re not encouraged to participate. (Trudi)

I think management thinks their opinions are much more important than the people on the ground because I know I’m probably one of the more outspoken people in meetings; I always ask questions when they bring in a new policy about something and many times I feel like it falls on deaf ears even if they look like they’re accepting of it and agreeing with it in the meeting, nothing ever happens so that tells me it’s not important. (Trudi)

Shelter specific.
It’s the ones where, like what happened about a month ago, management that is disconnected with the rest of the employees, they just kind of cleaned house; they just put down six dogs, six dogs that have nothing wrong with them, no reason they couldn’t be adopted ... I get an e-mail early the next morning after it happened that they put all these dogs down, there’s no talk of it, and no, you know, there were three people in management who did it in the middle of the night, so there would be no…and those are the hard ones to take, the ones where they are unnecessary. [One dog] actually had a potential patron coming in the next to visit, so he may have gone out. (Mallory)

Although it is beyond the scope of the current study to investigate resiliency factors, it was noted that several participants appeared to cope better with difficult euthanasia and policy decisions when the reasoning behind the decisions were communicated clearly by management and even moreso when the individual was an active and genuinely valued part of the decision-making process.

I’m usually pretty good [in reaction to euthanasia] because I know at that point we’ve already tried basically all we can. We don’t really take the decision lightly and we sit down at our tech meetings and discuss who we think might not be good to go up for adoption. There’s a lot of thought put into it so usually when it does come down to the decision it’s not too difficult just…well, it’s difficult but you know it’s probably the best thing for the animal. (Diane)

3.2.2.5. Work relationships. Twenty participants from seven different shelter locations described experiencing strain associated with their relationships with coworkers. All 20 participants reported several types of interpersonal conflicts that centered on different aspects of care of the animals. The themes that emerged within this category included: Differing interpretations of animal behaviour; and opposing workplace cliques. All participant responses within this category described shelter specific concerns.

3.2.2.5.1. Differing interpretations of animal behaviour. The most common theme within the work relationships category, reported by 14 out of the 20 participants, was
interpersonal conflict surrounding differing individual interpretations of animal behaviour, particularly when euthanasia was being considered as an option. Participants described this conflict as resulting in both overtly aggressive interactions and more subtle passive aggressive exchanges where questions of hierarchy and level of education might be brought up. Participants noted that interpersonal conflict could be intensified by the level of attachment a particular employee feels toward an animal they feel is not being offered the best care or is being misrepresented in euthanasia decision meetings.

_Shrelter specific concerns._

Sometimes you’ll get a little bit of stress between colleagues because one person has a different interpretation over the behaviour or temperament of an animal. (Susan)

Most dogs at the shelter have someone in their corner; some shelter employee in their corner. And a lot of the employees disagree, like, “Well I hate that dog,” “Well I love that dog.” Well, you know, you didn’t love it enough to take it home but you liked it enough to want to keep it alive. We would have many meetings, angry, bitter, fighting meetings about, “Ok it’s time to euthanize x,” “We can’t euthanize x, everybody loves him,” “Yeah, but he keeps trying to bite people and he once attacked another dog,” “Oh come on he’s great.” (Judith)

I guess even though I like my coworkers, I like them all, I trust them all to a great extent, I lost respect for two of them especially because I feel like their judgement is sketchy and they’re not coming from a place of truly stepping back to observe an animal’s behaviour, it’s coming from some gut reaction and I wish we had a template [for] how you make these decisions … [The conflict] is mostly about their fate; whether they are ok to go out or they’re just not going to make it. (Amanda)

Strong opinions when it comes to how to rehab or deal with a particular animal, I know they get a lot of that with the cats and dogs. You know someone might say, “We find this dog aggressive” and someone else might say, “No he’s not, he’s perfectly fine.” And you get a different opinion about how you approach different animals and tempers can get a little heated. (Nicole)

I think where our difficulties occur is in terms of expectations or sometimes emotions. Like how to approach a circumstance with a particular animal for example. You know, you’ll have someone going, “I think it needs this,” and someone else going, “I think it
needs that,” and you can get into quite a heated conversation about that believe it or not. I think most of us are really good about realizing that was a discussion in the moment and walking away and having it not impact but sometimes if you feel really strongly on something and you can’t make the other person appreciate where you’re coming from that can make it difficult to let it go. (Andrea)

Other stressful situations can arise between staff members; differences of opinions and which animals should go into adoptions and which animals should be euthanized ... Sometimes hierarchy can play a role. What your background is. What schooling did you take to get here? You know, “You came from a zoo. Why are you working at a shelter?” or, “You don’t have a vet tech degree. Why are you working here?” (Anna)

... Sometimes it’s just maliciousness on the other people’s part that, “Oh I don’t like the dog, then I’ll kill it.” I worked at [a shelter] where the dog would jump up on them and grab them and they’d say, “That’s aggressive, I can’t touch that dog.” I’m like, “It’s a puppy, it’s not trained. It’s not aggressive if it doesn’t want to go into a kennel, I’m sorry if it doesn’t want to go into a little box.” That’s stressful. You work with the dog a bit more. [But] they don’t want to work with them, so they say nope we have to euthanize them. (Carol)

With the euthanasia obviously there’s disagreements over which animals should be euthanized and why animals should be euthanized and within the shelter amongst staff and amongst management and the vets and stuff there can be at times a little bullying atmosphere around some of those issues ... there can be sort of a, “Oh she wants to save everything, she’s so naive’ kind of attitude.” So there can be a lot of divisiveness even amongst the actual staff. (Erin)

There was a dog that came in that was mistreated, not cared for at all, and it was very nervous which turned it into a very fear biter dog. To me I understand that and you don’t push a dog like that. If you want you can kind of baby it for a while until it’s more comfortable in its new environment. There were two people, one of them knew the personality of this dog, they took it upon themselves to have this dog on a leash and lift its tail to check a mat under its tail. The dog had no muzzle put on it. They thought they could hold the dog. The dog turned around and bit the girl. That lead to the dog being in quarantine and now the dog is euthanized because of...and my stress and frustration tends to be that because of people’s stupidity, or not understanding dog behaviour, this dog is now euthanized. So these kinds of things bother me and they take a big toll. I find a lot of dogs get labelled by people who don’t have a clue. (Jessica)

I guess the most stressful part lately, especially, is that there are so many people in the department and we don’t always agree and we’ll get personal relationships with the dogs and see excellent qualities about them that maybe others in our department won’t see. So
there’s a lot of back and forth and fighting for dogs ... There’s a lot of tension there because it creates tension within us even if it’s a redirection of our frustration. But we do get very frustrated with each other ... We never raise our voices, it’s never that kind of stuff, but it does get intense I think internally. You begin to defend the dog like it’s your own dog. (Lauren)

... Dealing with being second guessed by other staff members who don’t have all the information or have had different experiences with the dogs because of context, is difficult too ... So one thing may be, “The dog was fine with us, you guys are questioning decisions that we’re making,” when it was all very different stimuli and moments in time and what was happening and environmental factors and many other things that are involved in a decision or how we’re proceeding. (Mary)

3.2.2.5.2. Opposing workplace cliques. Seven participants out of the 20 whose responses fell under the workplace relationships category also described conflict between opposing cliques: those who view shelter work as “just a job” versus those who feel passionately about their role; and those who have been recently trained in the latest behavioural techniques versus staff who with less training or who were educated many years ago. Once again, as seen in the differing interpretations of animal behaviour theme, all reported interpersonal conflicts between cliques concerned the treatment of the shelter animals.

Shelter specific concerns.

There’s some that you liked as people but you didn’t like them professionally and it usually boiled down to the separation between the coworkers who were passionately involved and cared and the coworkers who absolutely had that flip-off switch: “It’s just a job,” “Oh x was euthanized, I didn’t even know that dog was still here.” You know, the people who just totally didn’t give a crap about what was happening around them ... I think that was the variability between employees; mostly on your level of involvement and also your level of practicality but that had to do with religion and all sorts of other things. Everybody had a different point where enough is enough for an animal needing to be euthanized but I think that’s specific to the no-kill world versus the kill-shelter world. (Judith)

The older colleagues have a different school of thought with regard to how to train dogs
and the younger colleagues, we all come from the same positive reinforcement attitudes that you can change a behaviour by changing the emotional context around the behaviour. And I would say that some of the older colleagues don’t really believe that and some of them just don’t know enough about dog behaviour to even understand what you’re talking about ... (Amanda)

The people who have been here maybe 25 years ... They never got this job because of the animals. It was just to stay within the city. Yeah, it’s not about the animal. It’s about the money. (Anna)

You’ve got the people who are more focused on rescue and trying to save animals and stuff and then you’ve got the group that are more of the mentality that you do what management tells you and you follow the rules and see it as some sort of weakness when you don’t want to euthanize an animal. (Erin)

There’s people that it’s a job to them. There’s people that, you know, do the minimum, what they need to do and then they’re out of here. Then there’s people that will go a step beyond and take time to socialize that dog. (Jessica)

There does seem to be a little bit of the old guard and the new guard...they’ve been there a little bit longer and are a little bit more black and white about things. And then there’s the staff who are more recent who are a little bit more, “Well let’s try this, let’s try that, let’s try this obscure thing and see if it helps,” and it sometimes doesn’t and sometimes the old guard is on the money. So I should give credit when it’s due but there are two different schools of thought because of at what point we were educated on this. Things have changed in the last 10 years in behaviour modification ... (Lauren)

3.2.3. Individual Related Stressors

3.2.3.1. Work-home interface. Eighteen participants from all seven shelter locations reported strain associated with the conflicting demands of home and work. The following themes emerged within this category: Strain-based conflict; and time-based conflict. Participant responses within this category described both generic and shelter specific concerns.

3.2.3.1.1. Strain-based conflict. All 18 participants with responses that fell in the work-home interface category described experiencing strain-based conflict where the emotional strain
of their work carried into and negatively impacted their home life. They explained that workplace strain, and in particular emotional reactions to events at work, including euthanasia, followed them home. Despite a desire to separate work from their home-life these participants found it difficult to let go of their daily strain. They described often saving the expression of their strain until arriving home but finding that family and partners frequently did not understand their experiences or the reasoning behind their emotional reactions. These participants also described avoiding, at times, discussing their work strain at home out of concern of burdening family with their distress or a belief that they might “spread the sadness.” One participant explained that shelter work involves a unique class of stress in that you are working with living things that require your care to stay alive and cannot be shut off at the end of the day, resulting in a job that is difficult to walk away from and not take home.

*Shelter specific concerns.*

And 1010% affected my relationships. Because, you know, that’s all you want to talk about and unless you’re a shelter employee nobody wants to hear it. And so you either date somebody who is working there with you, which was a common thing. I was just a bridesmaid in a coworker’s wedding who married her husband that she met there. You better have a community of friends that want to talk to you about it otherwise you’re going to alienate people. And it even goes back to the purebred dog thing; you’re going alienate people who just went out and purchased their hypoallergenic whatever. So yeah, definitely destroyed personal relationships unless people are willing to roll their eyes and go, “[She]’s just that crazy dog person...take what she does with a grain of salt.” (Judith)

I save the sad for home. Absolutely. (Amanda)

If I’m crying he’s just like, “But you know this is what you do.” I’m like, “I understand that but I’m in a business that requires a part of me to be exposed emotionally” and for him he just doesn’t understand why I even let that happen because he’s like, “Why would you do that? You know you’re just going to get upset.” Well because I want to know that I care. (Wendy)

... He actually is a very sensitive kind of person and so I don’t want to take my feeling sad and helpless home and off load that on him. (Andrea)
If you spoke to my fiancé...yeah I take [emotional reactions] home all the time ... it’s when I get upset about an animal being euthanized I take it home with me. My fiancé has heard for the umpteenth time that I’ve had to euthanize one of my animals. You know, you’re agitated, you snap, yeah it causes stress. (Carol)

My partner has been impacted from hearing a lot of the stuff and of course it’s upsetting for him; he doesn’t work in the field. He really doesn’t want to hear about how many dogs were killed today, you know what I mean ... So he’s certainly impacted in some ways. He’s pretty supportive for the most part but he definitely has made it clear he is sick of hearing about it. I have to sugar coat things actually for him to a degree. (Erin)

Especially if it’s something negative then you can feel your anxiety go up, you can feel your heart race, it really gets to the point where you’re dizzy because you let it get to you that much. And then you take it from here and for me, I talk about it all the time, so on my way home with my husband it’s just constant and it’s not healthy because you need to let it go. You must let it go but I find it very difficult. (Jessica)

It will follow me home sometimes if it’s a dog that I’m thinking about a lot, even if it’s a dog that we’re still making a decision, we’re still trying the options, it will follow me home. But my friends that aren’t [at the shelter], I try to avoid bringing it up to them because I don’t want to make someone else feel bad about something that I already feel bad about. I don’t see the point in saying, “Well this dog that I really liked was euthanized today” and then my friend who has never worked in a shelter, who has never understood that kind of a life, is just sad because a dog got put down. I don’t like to spread unhappiness with my friends. (Lauren)

3.2.3.1.2. **Time-based conflict.** Three of the 18 participants with responses that fell within the *work-home interface* category described experiencing a time-based conflict resulting from the time and energy required to successfully meet the competing demands of their roles at work and home. All three of these participants came from the group of seven participants in supervisory or management positions. These participants described feeling torn between their responsibilities at work and home but ultimately often prioritized work over family due to the vulnerability of the animals in their care and the participants’ sense of indispensability. They also expressed feeling guilt about work encroaching on family time through constant availability on cell-phones.
Generic concerns.

I think there is to a certain degree a high level of stress on staff when they go home dealing with not only their husband but any children they may have. I see stress on some staff where they’re torn between the children and work … If an animal comes in that they’re dealing with that needs their immediate attention and then getting a phone call because their child has to be taken out of school because they’re sick, you’ll find some staff that will actually deal with the animal and then deal with their children … Some staff get really stressed out that if they start this they want to finish this before dealing with their own family. (Susan)

I’ll come home, and part of the problem is I tend to…well I kind of have to…take work home with me, you know, because I’m on call. So we’ll be trying to have a dinner and the phone’s ringing. (Eva)

I’ve had one vacation and they were very good about…they took my phone away…and they still managed to text me on my own phone three times. It’s just frustrating with the family life because…and I think part of it is that when I started here my kids were still younger, now they’re older, now I have grandkids and I’d like to spend time with them because I saw what I missed with my kids because of working here … I try to tell them that I’m going to do this and that and I still get phone calls so there’s always interruptions. And maybe…it’s part of my job description so I can’t really say stop calling me … I’m a little resentful. It’s very sad. That’s why I came right out and told my boss, “This is not going to happen with my grandchildren.” (Eva)

And we’re attached to a blackberry. Now I’m answering emails at 3am if I happen to be awake. (Andrea)

Push comes to shove he will always be first. But I have to admit that a lot of the time, day to day, just because of my work ethic and because I am attached, it’s not easy for me to walk away. It really really isn’t. Even to the point where he has the flu and he’s almost never home and he’s at home with the flu and I have been asked to go to a board meeting and because he’s in bed resting I literally went to the board meeting to make a presentation and I will tell you he was really not happy with me when I got home. Like, “I can’t even be sick once every 10 years and you can actually stay home...” That kind of thing. (Andrea)

Well it’s even impacted my external life with my parents because there’s been situations where there have been family events which they would have liked me to come to and I have a shelter event and I end up going to the shelter event instead of the family event. (Andrea)
3.2.4. Animal Shelter Specific Stressors

3.2.4.1. Public perception. Twenty-one participants from all seven shelters reported that the public’s perception of shelter work contributed to individual strain. The following themes emerged within this category: Shelter work being associated with euthanasia; an assumption that all shelters are connected; an assumption that shelter workers do not care about the animals; and a perception that no-kill shelters are morally superior.

3.2.4.1.1. Shelter work associated with euthanasia. The most common theme in the responses within the public perception category, reported by 16 of the 21 participants, concerned the public tending to primarily associate shelter work with euthanasia. The participants explained that the public seems to assume that animal shelters euthanize every animal that is surrendered or brought in as lost or injured. Comments that participants have received from the public have also suggested that they tend to assume that animals brought into any shelter will have a time limit to be adopted before they are euthanized. The participants explained that the assumption that they euthanize everything is frustrating because it appears to imply a thoughtless action when, in fact, they work hard to rehabilitate the animals and the decision to euthanize is taken very seriously. Two participants hypothesized that the commonly reported patron question, “Are you just going to kill it?” and the assumption of euthanasia in general, may in part be a consequence of a misunderstanding among the public that all shelters are connected, sharing the same mission and policies. One participant explained that these comments feel like a personal attack because they imply that the public thinks she would endorse such practices.

Very few of our patrons realize that we only euthanize sick or behaviorally distressed animals. Most of our patrons will say, “How long does this dog have?” Like, until it gets adopted. We’re not going to euthanize it just because it’s here. (Amanda)
What I do hear most often ... is, “If you take it to a shelter it’ll be killed,” and most shelters try very hard not to do that but it’s that one bad story, that one euthanized dog that overrides all of the times that it didn’t happen ... that one perception does frustrate me because I’m the one responsible for making those calls and I don’t do it flippantly and I take a lot of care in making those choices. I try not to take it personally but I guess on one level I kind of do. (Wendy)

I hear somebody say, “They’re just going to kill it anyhow,” and it’s like, “No, no, no, you do not understand how hard we work with the individual” ... (Ingrid)

It seems like they assume shelters are dingy little hellholes where dogs go to die and maybe you can save one. And unfortunately a lot of the time that’s true but a lot of the time since they come in with that preconception they don’t necessarily think that we are doing as much as we can or doing as well as we can and as well as we are. (Leslie)

When it comes to wildlife and I’m sure it happens in the cat/dog stuff is [a member of the public has] an injured animal and my response is, “Can you bring it to the shelter?” and 40% of the time the immediate question that comes out of their mouth is, “Well are you just going to kill it?” Are you just going to kill it? It’s like, really? (Nicole)

They just have that common misconception that shelters put everything down and if something ends up at a shelter it is doomed. (Nicole)

It definitely contributes [to strain] because I feel like I have to defend my shelter a lot … you do get defensive because you recognize how much our shelter does for the animals. (Trudi)

Some people still think that we have time limits on adoptions, and if they don’t get adopted within a certain time limit we’re going to euthanize them, which is completely untrue, we haven’t done that in years and years, but that’s a lot of the public do believe that that’s what we do. (Tina)

Probably about half the time somebody will bring in a stray dog and, this is a quote, people are always like, “You’re just going to kill it right?” They always assume that because we’re an animal shelter our business is euthanasia and not rehabilitation. And it’s not, I mean, we agonize over these decisions. (Lauren)

**3.2.4.1.2. Assumption that all shelters are connected.** Nine out of the 21 participants with responses that fell within the public perception category spoke about the public assumption that all animal shelters are the same, or connected as one organization, as contributing to strain.
These participants explained that the public tends to not be aware of the differences between municipal control facilities, humane societies, and private non-profit shelters or rescues leading them to associate the mission or policies of any one shelter that they are aware of with all other unrelated shelters. This misunderstanding means that any policy or personal experience at any shelter can impact how the public views and reacts to an unrelated shelter in their area.

Participants noted that this ‘lumping’ together of all shelters contributes to the assumption among members of the public, who may have heard of well publicized cases or social media campaigns, that animals will be euthanized if brought to a shelter. Participants also noted strain associated with the public assuming their tax dollars are funding their shelter, leading them to question the fees involved in their services. The consequences of the assumption of connectedness is similar to those of the assumption of euthanasia; participants described having to explain and defend their workplace and being personally blamed for the actions of an entirely different animal shelter whose policies may clash with their personal and professional values.

A lot of people associate [city run animal services] with the humane society. And people don’t quite understand what the difference is. (Susan)

I would say they have an idea but I don’t know how right it is because there are so many different versions of what a shelter is and every one is different and so I think part of that is understanding the difference between a jurisdictional shelter, so one run by the government, versus a private non-profit, like mine is, or a private for-profit. I mean, there’s all sorts of different versions and so I think that it’s hard. (Wendy)

You’ll be wearing the uniform or jacket and you run into a store and people approach us and say things … I had one who, I had my jacket on, and she was like, “You killed my dog,” and I was trying to ignore her but I knew who she was talking to. I mean, I’m in a grocery store hearing this and she kept it up and finally I said, “Excuse me, what are you talking about?” Well, come to find out it wasn’t even our shelter she was talking about. But talk about stressful because everyone was staring at you and you’re wearing a uniform that say’s what shelter you’re from and nobody else heard that it was the other shelter in the next county. Because a lot of people have a misconception that all the SPCA’s are connected. And they’re not. (Eva)

They think that you are funded by the town, so we are town employees [and] it’s their tax
dollars. (Andrea)

The weird part about it is that most of the time when you get cornered by somebody it’s the negative; they’ll tell you a negative story or an experience that they had with you as an organization. And it may not even be your organization they had a bad experience with but it was a humane society and because they don’t realize that we’re all individuals the brush is across the board which can be frustrating. You can try to explain how you’re different but often they’ve already made up their mind about that. (Andrea)

But it seems to me, from the calls I get and the people coming in, most people think all shelters are the same. That each shelter doesn’t necessarily have its own mission or rules. (Trudi)

There was so much mean talk about shelters on [a Facebook group] and every time that somebody would say something about shelters just love to kill and the people who work there hate animals and how do you sleep at night and all of that stuff ... they just kept lumping all shelters into that and the first 50 times I would defend and say, “Don’t lump all shelters together, there’s a way to have a shelter that’s not like this.” And eventually I abandoned that cause because that was so hurtful to me. (Trudi)

When people are hearing [media reports about other shelters] they come in and are automatically angry about it and since they think we’re associated they start getting angry at us and it’s something that we’re very careful to explain that we’re a separate organization, that these are our policies, this is what we do, you know, what you see on TV going on there is not what’s happening here. (Sarah)

3.2.4.1.3. Assumption that shelter workers do not care about the animals. Eight out of the 21 participants reported strain associated with the public perception that they do not care about the animals in their shelters or that it is “just a job” for them. Comments from the public, or family and friends, such as, “How can you work there?” and “I could never work there, I love animals too much,” are taken to imply a lack of respect for, or understanding of the work. Participants described these comments as frustrating “because we do the best we can” and “care enough to make these hard decisions.”

I think a lot of the frustration of shelter employees comes from the fact that you watch so many animals die and people think it’s just another job to you. (Judith)

The public needs to understand that we do our very best and we are running at maximum capacity and, while the decisions are not easy, and every one may not agree with them,
we’re always trying to keep the greater good at heart and the animals’ best interest at heart and it’s tough. I just wish they had a little sympathy for that, yes, we feel for the animals too, they seem to think that we are detached from them. (Nicole)

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard from people ... “I could never work at shelters, I love the animals too much.” That they have the perception that we are there because we don’t really like the animals. That’s not true. (Mallory)

One of the things I always tell the volunteers, interestingly enough, when we talk about two things which are going to impact them, one of them is going to be the subject of euthanasia, from the perspective of experiencing it but also from the outside perception of you working in an organization where there is this idea that you’d rather kill an animal than adopt an animal...that they’re going to have to deal with that. (Andrea)

... We’re all here because we love animals, we treat them well, we try to do the best for them, and that’s just one thing that I would love people to know ...  (Tina)

3.2.4.1.4. Perception that no-kill shelters are morally superior. Four out of the 21 participants described frustration with the public perception that no-kill shelters are morally superior to all other types of shelters. They attribute this to the public’s lack of awareness of the limited admission policies of no-kill facilities and the consequences of open-admission no-kill facilities for the animals. Participants explained that this public perception inappropriately “demonizes” shelters that are not no-kill and the people that work within them.

People pretty much know two different aspects of shelters; they know kill shelters and no-kill shelters. And to be a no-kill shelter means animals are going to be suffering. That’s the way I look at it because you’re going to have a sick animal that needs care or that can’t have care, you can’t afford care or something like that, and if you are a no-kill shelter that animal just suffers until it dies. (Leslie)

[The public perception is] that at mission shelters, like the one I worked in, you know, the staff enjoys killing the animals, and that no-kill shelters are the heroes, when in my opinion it’s the other way around. Mission shelters are the heroes. I think people, they think that it’s horrible, they think that the employees like to do it. (Mallory)

[The public] come and go, “Oh do you kill animals?” or “Oh I don’t like you because you’re not a no-kill shelter.” If anyone in their right mind has actually been to a true no-kill shelter and saw those animals live there for 12 years and haven’t been touched in six years, they wouldn’t want anybody to be a no-kill shelter. But the whole perception is
making it all pretty with the numbers; “Oh we don’t kill our animals.” Well yeah [they] can be picky about what they take in; we offer them six animals they might take one. They’ll take a kitten over a dog [with behaviour problems] … because the kitten, they go, “Oh we can adopt that really quickly.” (Carol)

A lot of people are really big talkers and want to see us be no-kill which ... means different things to different people. We are an open admission shelter. We will always be an open admission shelter. A no-kill shelter sends the dogs they can’t place down the street to us. So people do not get this. You get the people out there, these activists, who talk about no-kill when really it’s just passing the buck. I went to a shelter ... that was no-kill and they had [aggressive] dogs there that you couldn’t touch for the rest of their lives. They couldn’t have human contact, they’d toss them food and lock them out to clean them up. But no, I wouldn’t work somewhere that did that. I just couldn’t do it. That would be far more stressful and horrific to me than anything that I’ve had to do. So people do not understand, don’t get it. They think that no-kill really means that; that there should be some way to save everybody. However they’re not the ones who are willing to take some of these dogs. (Mary)

3.2.4.2. Responsibility for life. Eight participants from six different shelter locations described feeling personally responsible for the lives of the animals they are in contact with as contributing to strain. The sole theme that emerged within this category was a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the animals, be it within the shelter system or in the home of an adopter.

3.2.4.2.1. Sense of responsibility for the outcomes of animals. All eight of these participants explained that this sense of responsibility can initiate as soon as an animal enters the shelter and can lead workers to feel guilty when they fail to find an animal a good home, are unable to convince their shelter not to euthanize a particular animal, or when they cannot take animals to their own home to save them. The sense of responsibility also manifested in concern about the outcome of animals with a new owner or with other employees when the participant was planning on retiring or quitting. A sense of ownership over the animals, though not explicitly reported by participants, runs through this theme.
If they’re great with me but somebody else has a lot of problems with that dog then I know I’m going to have to try and do something or I’m going to lose the battle and the dog’s going to get euthanized. (Carol)

So once you’ve touched it, you’ve put it in this environment so I feel that maybe it’s just that. I brought you here and I want to bring you somewhere safe. I don’t want to be bringing you to your last destination. (Jessica)

I feel guilty for certain dogs that I can’t bring home because I have a dog that doesn’t like other dogs. So I feel guilty that I can’t save more of them. (Sarah)

He was born with a hairlessness condition ... He came in as a puppy and nobody wanted to adopt him because he was creepy. I thought he was awesomely cool but it wasn’t at the right time in my life. You can’t save them all and so I had to compartmentalize... “Can’t save them all, can’t save them all.” And he was one that I hated to leave behind at the shelter but I just knew, you know, you can’t have 30 dogs. So I left him behind but still tried to be his advocate; got him adopted into a home but he didn’t work out. He had spent too much time at the shelter...he was too reactive and when the time came I went to the shelter and adopted him and took him to my place and had him euthanized at my job because I felt like I owed that to him and I just felt so guilty. So guilty that I was willing to pay the $100 fee to adopt him, and then pay the 100 something dollars to euthanize him at my clinic. Not that that fixed anything. The $200...it helped nothing. It didn’t help him, it didn’t help me, but I felt like you have to try and show somebody somewhere something, that you’re sorry, and that was the only thing that I could think to do for him was bring him somewhere nice to have him euthanized versus in the back of a dingy shelter. (Judith)

There’s a relationship you have with the animals so it’s feeling overwhelmed by the fact that this is one that you actually...yes, you helped it, but if your end goal is to see it in a forever home happy you failed at that despite your best efforts. (Andrea)

When I know a dog’s going to fail and I know it’s a bad home...I can’t live with that...I can’t go, “Oh well just because somebody else said it’s ok,” I can’t go, “Oh I wash my hands of it.” I mean that’s just not how I am. I worry about the animals when they leave. (Carol)

For me, I’d rather see a dog get euthanized than go to an abusive home because if it can’t get out of here, it can’t live its whole life in here but I’m concerned about what happens to it once it gets out in the public. So I always give people my email and ask them to update me on how the dog’s doing because to me that’s my reward; if I’m able to follow up and say, “Oh look at this, they sent me a picture.” This is what I work hard for. So that’s a huge thing with me. I don’t do out of sight out of mind. (Jessica)
Even with the animals that I’ve voted to go ahead and euthanize...a life is a life and this is a life that we’ve failed. Maybe I personally didn’t fail it but we have failed it. We put this life on earth as an animal to serve people, depending on how you look at it, and we’ve failed the animal. (Andrea)

I think what keeps you going though in this profession, in this calling, is the fact that there’s never a good time to really walk away because it’s all happening so fluidly. I’m thinking of one of the horses at work now and it’s like, “Ok if I could just get you through and to your family it would be a good time to go” but in the interim five more animals come in. (Ingrid)

You also can’t leave because you feel like you can’t leave the animals in the hands of the crazy people. You’ve got even more reason to have to stay, you’ve got to try to do what you can to help the animals. But yes, I think about quitting all the time. (Mallory)

3.2.4.3. **Human clients.** Eighteen participants from six different shelter locations reported their interactions with the human clients in shelter work as a stressor. The following themes emerged within this category: How human clients treat shelter staff; and how human clients treat their own animals.

3.2.4.3.1. **How human clients treat shelter staff.** All 18 participants described experiencing strain associated with the way human clients treat them, as shelter employees. They explained that interactions with human clients become stressful when they are rude, present as entitled, attempt to guilt or threaten employees into bending rules, ignore advice or education regarding adoption matches, or lie to employees to evade fees or misrepresent themselves during the adoption process. They explained that the lying and ignoring of advice about adoption matches is particularly frustrating given the amount of time employees have spent working to rehabilitate the animals and the hurt they experience when an animal returns to the shelter with a mark on its record due to a poor match making it less adoptable. One participant noted that while human clients appear to believe that shelters are there to serve them, shelter employees
work under the belief that shelters exist to serve the animals.

... You try and educate this owner and he turns around and tells you to fuck off, excuse the language. I can’t turn around and tell him, “You know what, you are a frigging idiot,” right? All we can do is encourage him to be a more responsible pet owner. Tell him the cons of what he is doing and how that can affect the animal...you can’t really turn around and tell him what you really think of him. That can sometimes be stressful. (Susan)

Yes if they ignore [my advice] I will take that home. If they ignore what I’m saying I worry about that. I lose more sleep over that than I do over euthanasia believe it or not. I will come home and not be able to sleep because somebody adopted a dog and I know they didn’t listen. (Amanda)

We do everything we can for the animals, not for the people and I can’t say that out loud but no one thinks of it that way. There you go, that’s a big one... People think that we are there for them and we’re not. We are there for the animals. Honestly, if I could work at that place and not have to deal with another human being every day, I’d do it. That would be great. That would be like the biggest promotion I could get. But unfortunately I’m in customer service at this job and people don’t understand that it’s not about them. None of this is about them. We try to help them but that’s not our number one priority which is why when they have a two-year-old that sure, “It’s been around dogs, why can’t you waive this 13 and up restriction?”... We’re not going to do it because we don’t care about your two-year-old. We care about the dog that’s going to get returned here because your two-year-old pulled its tail and it growled. (Leslie)

Sometimes you will interact with the person who already knows everything, or they think they already know everything because they had some dog around 14 years ago, you try and educate them on something that they are clearly wrong on, they don’t want to have it and that leaves you feeling worse because like, what am I sending the dog into? (Mallory)

Anger sometimes. The anger comes largely from people’s unrealistic expectations of what they want and you’re, in a rational way, trying to explain to them why they can’t have what they want emotionally and so it’s anger and frustration at not being able to get the point across that you want to get across. (Andrea)

Ok, for me personally the most difficult thing I think is dealing with people who are not being totally honest, whether that is someone who is pretending they found a stray animal when it’s actually their animal, to somebody who is wanting to surrender an animal and is making up a reason why and it doesn’t make sense. (Trudi)

And a lot of times we have people call from those other jurisdictions and we’ll say, “Sorry, you have to call your local [shelter]”...it’s not unusual for someone to say, “Oh I’ll just kill it then” or “Oh I’ll let it go then” because they know we care about animals more than they do and that’s going to hurt us and that might make us break. And that’s hard...people do it. People are jerks. (Trudi)
And when people listen and when people truly take that information and use it, it can be so rewarding when it’s a positive outcome. But oftentimes we’ll get animals returned or we’ll get a beagle that comes back over and over again and when you adopted that beagle to them you told them they can’t leave it unsupervised in the backyard and time after time they leave it unsupervised in the backyard and it escapes and we pick it up as a stray and it’s very frustrating when you spent the time to talk to them about that and explain to them that the dog they have chosen, this is what they need to understand about it and they just don’t listen. (Sarah)

Somebody came in once with a 3 year old and a baby in their arms and they wanted a 120 lbs Rottweiler. The clincher was he hated other dogs. I’m not giving you this dog and then reading in the paper tomorrow about how it ate your baby. No. That’s setting this dog up for failure. I can adopt this dog out to somebody that can be a good home for it. And it always bothers me a little bit when people don’t show any consideration for their pets at home. Some don’t even show consideration for their children at home. (Erin)

Oh that’s another stress is the people that come in and their story changes so that they could leave the cat or the dog. They come in and they say that, “I have to surrender my cat”...well you have to make an appointment and they say, “Oh no I just found it... And here’s its carrying case and here’s its bowl!” so you know it’s their cat ... And the fee is $22 so at least pay that to help the shelter right? But no they don’t want to do that. But some people just think we’re stupid. (Karen)

Not listening to us, in general, I think is a big stressor. Sometimes it’s about, you know, this dog is not appropriate because you have an infant and he will eat your infant and sometimes it’s that they don’t listen if we say these dogs will probably not get along, they don’t want to kill each other now, they don’t want to hurt each other, but you need to keep them separate, and we give them all these instructions, and two days later our dog is returned for fighting with the other dog because they didn’t follow any of our instructions. We see a lot of dogs get returned for reasons that we have said to these people, “You need to do this or this will happen,” and the dog will come back and then that dog will have a mark on their record because they were returned for behaviour and that makes them less adoptable. (Lauren)

The public tends to come in defensive. I’m sure they have their own guilt and baggage that they’re bringing in with them and can react inappropriately, defensively about being questioned. This is already I’m sure in many cases difficult for them but it’s incredibly important for us to get an accurate history and people don’t always tell you the truth. So I’ve become a bit jaded in that sense over the years with kind of assuming that people aren’t telling the truth until I have reason to believe they are. (Mary)

3.2.4.3.2. How human clients treat their own animals. Thirteen of the 18 participants with responses falling within the human clients category described witnessing the way some human clients treat their animals as a stressor. These participants described feeling frustrated
when interacting with what they referred to as “irresponsible owners.” These irresponsible owners included “repeat offenders” whose animals would be regularly picked up by the shelter off the street, who train their dogs to attack, who treat their animals as disposable items, and/or who abuse their animals.

It’s never nice to see the irresponsible pet owners who never come to get their animals, who don’t care about their animals. (Susan)

... Like somebody will try to surrender a cat, we don’t have room so we put them on a waiting list and then I go out to the parking lot an hour later and they left the cat in the carrier in the sun in the parking lot. It’s like, “Oh my God, are you kidding me”… So now we have a dehydrated cat and no room. Now we have to triage this cat because it’s half dead. (Amanda)

I know I’m making a difference, but sometimes it just feels like it never ends, you’re just never going to win the battle. What’s one nest of squirrels that you’ve rehabbed, when there is a world of people trapping them and stabbing them with sticks, I mean, the stuff that we hear from some of the members of the public, it can be really just disturbing at times. And to know that sometimes there’s just nothing that you can do, there’s just nothing you can do, and that gets really tiring. (Nicole)

It’s like they’re moving two days from now and call us, or just walk in, and (I love this), say, “I’m here to donate my cat to you.” Oh yeah, we hear that a lot. And first of all we have a waiting list now. And then they get mad and start yelling at us [saying], “Well I’m just going to leave it out on the rail track” or something like this, or “I’m going to take it out and shoot it.” And at that point we will take it because you worry about the animal and then we try to crowd the animal into an already crowded shelter. So it’s like they just don’t take responsibility. So that’s sad to me. (Eva)

And I think that’s part of the frustration, that the people who don’t understand that pets aren’t disposable, it feels like they never will understand. (Trudi)

Most of us, myself included, who work there, we all have our own animals, we’ve all pretty much gone broke caring for animals during medical crises and, you know, we’re all making really low income and yet these people will call me from really rich areas where they own a huge seven-bedroom house with five bathrooms and their kids are in private school and they can’t afford to care for a bladder infection in their cat or something like that. So it’s kind of exhausting dealing with…but it’s really stressful and it makes you angry and you start to distrust everyone because you’re constantly getting lied to about why. (Trudi)
Well I found the front desk, when I worked that, very stressful just because of the number of people coming in with either very sad stories or people that came in that seemed to not care and wanting to get rid of their animals for reasons that were not really what most people, I would hope, would consider reasonable reasons to give up pets. So that got stressful having to keep a customer care face and be very polite with people who are being very rude to you and don’t understand how many animals that we have in our care and just because they’re going on vacation or that type of thing that we need to take their animal right now when we’ve got 300 cats in the back that don’t have homes. That type of thing can be stressful. (Sarah)

I suppose also it’s very stressful when you see somebody surrender their animal that’s in extremely poor shape and you just wonder, “Why did you let it go this long?” That’s very stressful for me and it just happened recently with a dog. It was in such bad shape I thought it was going to die before I got the euthanasia drugs in. I almost had to go home that day I was in tears. I was just really bad. (Anna)

And people just surrendering in general. Not for euthanasia but, “I got this dog. It peed on my couch. I don’t want it anymore.” That’s rough. A lot of people treat their pets as just a willy nilly item to buy and not really realize, or care, that it’s a life-long commitment...it’s just another piece of property. (Anna)

Like the people who pick up their dog for the sixth time in like three months and they turn away and say, “Well it’s not my fault.” Or the people dumping their animal off because they just don’t like it anymore and they make up an excuse saying, “Oh, I’m allergic.” I’m like, why don’t you just be truthful. I’ve had one person in 10 years tell me, “I just don’t want the animal anymore.” You know what, at least you were honest. And then there’s the people, “Oh I got this dog off of kijiji two weeks ago and it barks too much.” Or, “I got a puppy and it grew too big.” They’re not disposable things. “Oh well you know, my cat’s peeing all over the house, can you put it up for adoption?” and they get mad at you when you say no, we will have to euthanize it because no one’s going to want a cat that pisses all over your house. Or it’s the people who come and euthanize their dogs here just because they’re too cheap to take them to their own vet...and their dog has a tumour the size of a basketball on the side of their leg. We’re supposed to be euthanizing public animals for the ones that can’t afford it. But I’m sorry, when they pull up in a Mercedes to drop off their cat to euthanize it that they’ve had for 18 years and it’s a bag of bones because all they have to do is pay $22 to drop it off and then just walk out the door. (Carol)

3.2.4.4. Euthanasia issues. Twenty-one participants from all seven shelter locations represented in this study described euthanasia issues as contributing to their experience of strain.
The following themes emerged within this category: Performing euthanasia and its aftermath; and the euthanasia decision-making process.

3.2.4.4.1. Performing euthanasia and its aftermath. The most common theme in the euthanasia issues category, was strain associated with the act of euthanasia and its aftermath. Nineteen of the 21 participants explained that euthanasia is made more difficult to perform when there is an emotional attachment with the animal, when the reasoning behind the euthanasia decision is unknown, when the reasoning behind a euthanasia is not agreed with, and when they feel the animal could have done well if the shelter had more options available, in terms of funding, more highly skilled adopters, foster homes, or rescues. One participant noted that performing euthanasia alone can make it easier to fall into anthropomorphizing and ruminating over end of life issues. The participants reported feeling sadness, devastation, anxiety, helplessness, and heartbreak in response to performing euthanasia. They also described feeling disgust and frustration when the reasoning behind the euthanasia was unknown or considered insufficient.

I mean, I get pretty weepy [after euthanasia]… Not at the shelter, I don’t weep in front of people I don’t know extremely well. So I have a good cry even if it’s a dog I knew was never going to pass. (Amanda)

He was a really cute, energetic dog and he had a meet and greet with another dog later in the day so I went in his kennel and I went to see him and he was just jumping all over me and he was super excited and the next day I went to see how the meet and greet went and it said he’d been euthanized because he just got overstimulated and started getting mean. And it was just a shock because it was the first time. I didn’t even think anything like that would happen … I don’t want to say disappointed again because that doesn’t seem strong enough but I thought they’d done the wrong thing. And also I felt a little bit guilty because I went into his kennel before his meet and greet and then they said he was overstimulated afterwards so I wasn’t sure if maybe my being in there started the overstimulation or if it was the other dog so I wanted to know more about it but at the same time I didn’t because I didn’t want it to be like, “He was fine until people started spending time with him.” (Ingrid)
It just hit me, it hit me exactly what I was doing. It hit me that I was the one responsible for taking that animal’s life. Even though I knew that it was to ease the animal’s pain and suffering … I guess it was just being alone, you know, in a quiet room, just me and this creature, just being, being the last thing he saw and wondering what it was he was thinking that I was doing. I guess that is just when it hits you most. You just wonder what it is that that animal is going through. It was just me and him and just the room. (Nicole)

The hardest part of when an animal has to be put down, it’s not when there is kind of a good reason which you can get your head around. It’s the ones … that have nothing wrong with them, no reason they couldn’t be adopted … those are the hard ones to take, the ones where they are unnecessary … Those are the ones that are devastating, and those are the ones that cause you to cry, even after 18 years. Like I said, that thing that happened about a month ago, when they put down those dogs overnight, I cried over that. Especially getting that e-mail the next morning … it’s devastating because it’s so senseless. (Mallory)

Oh definitely anxiety. A lot of it is when the animal is suffering and you’re trying to find a vein and all you want to do is end the suffering and the vein’s blowing or something and you’re upset because you can’t get it. At that point what I usually do is get another technician in there and say, “You gotta do it.” Because the animal is like maybe it was hit by a car where they’re having difficulty breathing and you know they’re suffering and you want to end the suffering and I can’t get it fast enough. I can’t help them fast enough. I would feel like somebody punches me in the gut. (Eva)

And even with the animals that I’ve voted to go ahead and euthanize…a life is a life and this is a life that we’ve failed. Maybe I personally didn’t fail it but we have failed it. We put this life on earth as an animal to serve people, depending on how you look at it, and we’ve failed the animal. So I’m always saddened by that and depending on the degree of connection I have my usual route is I will go get a coffee and drive down to the lake, have a little cry, get over it, drive back home. I kind of deal with it that way. I have my little grief thing. (Andrea)

Quite frequently the vast majority of shelter staff, and that would include the people who are literally hands-on caring for the animals every day, don’t know why a certain animal was euthanized and I think that makes it more difficult because then you’re not sure. (Trudi)

When there was one … she had to get euthanized, she was too sick. Obviously I had really bonded to her. It was like losing a pet; I spent more time with her than my own animal, so that was devastating but again that was needed and it was best for her. I definitely cried for a long time but it was good in the end, with what she needed so. (Nancy)

For me it’s stressful to euthanize an animal that I’ve become close to. If it’s a member of the public’s cat and it’s old and it’s time there’s no stress involved in that for me. But really when there’s a type of bond there. But I suppose also it’s very
stressful when you see somebody surrender their animal that’s in extremely poor shape and you just wonder, “Why did you let it go this long?” That’s very stressful for me and it just happened recently with a dog. It was in such bad shape I thought it was going to die before I got the euthanasia drugs in. I almost had to go home that day I was in tears. I was just really bad. (Anna)

Oftentimes the decisions come down to ... that’s the thing that makes it very stressful too because things come down from the vet and supervisors and then you have the staff who don’t necessarily agree with the decisions but are the ones who actually do the euthanizing. (Erin)

Sometimes I would say, “I’m not doing that no matter what, get someone else to do it, I’m too emotionally attached” but then I battle in my own head that, “No, this dog trusts you, you’re doing it because the last time with a person should be comforting” so I end up doing it because at the end of the day I think it would be a selfish act to walk away from it at that point. So I will be with it at the end. (Jessica)

I don’t know if it’s the loss, that I’m feeling the loss or I’m feeling compassion for them or something...I don’t know. But I just feel a little bit...it’s more like I dwell on it. It was the right decision...but was it, was it, was it. And how many more times do I have to do this, basically...because it’s the worst part about working at a shelter...is making a decision because part of it is, “Is it your life to give away?” (Lauren)

3.2.4.4.2. Euthanasia decision making process. Thirteen out of the 21 participants, with responses that fell within the euthanasia issues category, described strain associated with the euthanasia decision-making process. These participants described feeling overwhelmed, fatigued, and guilt-ridden by their responsibility for making life and death decisions, made even more difficult when they are emotionally invested in a particular animal’s case due to the time they have spent working with it or even because they relate to the emotional or behavioural issues the animal is struggling with. The decision making process is further complicated by the sometimes conflicting priorities of various departments, be it a focus on rehabilitation, fostering, public safety, space, or finances, and the perception that a breed bias or fear is influencing the vote of staff members supporting a euthanasia. Participants expressed frustration that the decision will often be determined by whomever can make the most eloquent argument or even by which staff happens to be present on a particular day. One participant noted that euthanasia
decisions are often made by upper-level staff or veterinarians who interact minimally with the animals and make little effort to seek the input of those working closest with the animal in question.

But not just necessarily their quality of life but also the public’s health and safety. Because that is something that we have to consider in terms of, for example, a dog comes in here and it’s placed under quarantine because it has bitten someone. We have to also weight the public’s health and safety against the animal’s life. That is sometimes a hard decision. (Susan)

So we had a dog that came in here under quarantine. The dog was actually adopted from us. We worked with it extensively on its behaviour. But the new owner who we had adopted it to could no longer look after it and had given it to someone else who we probably would not have adopted the dog out to. And this is over the course of years. The dog was put in a bad situation and it turned around and bit somebody, bit somebody quite bad. When that dog came in I made the decision that it wasn’t going back up for adoption because of the severity of the bite and that we were going to euthanize that dog. That [upset a lot of people]; I felt bad for the dog but I felt worse for the staff. Because I know that they didn’t like my decision and everyone had worked so hard years ago to get this dog to come around. That’s more stressful than the actual euthanasia of the dog. (Susan)

It’s so sad that you have to hold court, a trial, where you better hope somebody good is coming to that dog’s defence or you better hope you’re not off work that day because you’re going to miss the opportunity to stand in that dog’s corner and they’re going to be euthanized without you knowing it. (Judith)

You get passionate and for whatever reason, and it’s hard to pinpoint, you get attached to certain ones and you feel like if you lose that one you’re losing it for everybody. (Judith)

Probably the most stressful thing is being involved in evaluating a dog that we have to put to sleep. It’s easy to get there when the dog is either terminally ill or so behaviourally challenged that you know it’s leading a miserable life and existence because it’s afraid of everything ... But we have the dogs that love you or love one of your coworkers and will do anything for you guys but put a stranger in front of it and she is just bonkers. So what do you do? ... and that gets really hard because obviously any time you invest some time with a living being some kind of attachment forms … Anyway, that’s the most stressful thing. Little stresses like I wish I made more money, but none of that compares to how euthanasia is on the Richter scale of stress...you know, knowing that you’re making the right decision. (Amanda)

Yeah it’s always tough. Because of the cases I deal with I think I am exposed to euthanasia a lot more than some other people because the choice is mine and I take that incredibly seriously. I don’t like it. I wish that our culture was in a different
place to where either we weren’t creating the problems we’re creating that the shelter is made responsible for dealing with, or that we don’t have enough options for dogs that might do well in other environments but we don’t have that option available and those are the euthanasias that are hardest for me; when I have to make that decision because I know the dog may do better in a different environment but I don’t have that option and I can’t sit and hope forever that that option is going to just present itself. So sometimes I feel backed into a corner when I make that choice. And I hate that but at the same time I rationalize that myself by saying...again it’s a bit sad in a sense that I have to agonize over it. It’s not an easy decision so I feel a little bit better about that but also that someone that does care is making that choice rather than someone who didn’t. So that’s kind of how I rationalize it in my head to make it feel a little less horrifying. (Wendy)

I do get fatigue from the decision and there are days I’ve said, “You know what, I don’t want this animal to have to sit here another day just to sit here but at the same time for my own sanity I need to step away and either someone else needs to make a decision or you guys need to give me 24 hours and let me recharge and come back and relook at the evidence and the facts and make the decision then.” I’d rather wait a day, when the animal is not in dire physical straits or so terribly fearful or something that it’s literally in hell, then I would rather make sure I’m ok with it and I’d rather make sure I’m making a good decision rather than a fatigued decision. (Wendy)

I think sometimes [the relationship] makes it more difficult to make the best decision because I’ve become so invested in that individual and that’s where coworkers and volunteers come into play. You need a second set of eyes...third and fourth set of eyes. It’s one thing when it’s an animal that comes in very quickly and is, you know, open compound fractures, emaciated and it is kind of the most humane thing you can do...I have no problem then. But when you’re working through, maybe emotional problems with them or...it gets harder. (Ingrid)

Every time I have to vote yes for euthanasia … I feel badly and I do bring that home. In many cases I just feel that they are very nice dogs ... I agree that there’s no place necessarily for this dog in the situation that it’s in but it doesn’t mean that it didn’t deserve a chance and it’s just sad that somebody gave up on him and that he is where he is. It’s sad. (Sarah)

You have dogs that come in and there’s a minor behaviour problem, like they don’t like going in the kennel, so they show a little, that they’re scared. If it’s a big huge dog not everyone is comfortable or have experience working with large dogs so if other staff don’t like these dogs, then they might say that that dog needs to be euthanized because they think it’s aggressive, as well ... so then you have to euthanize a dog that you know in a different situation would thrive. (Carol)

I feel sometimes like the vet will come in and they’ve seen the dog for five minutes and they like give the dog a vaccine and it turns its head quickly and they’re like, “Oh this dog tried to bite me, kill it.” It’s like, “Are you kidding me, I’ve been working with that dog for two weeks. It’s fine.” You just poked him with a needle and it’s looking at you. (Erin)
But it’s really tough when you see a dog that you’ve spent months and months with that has come to think of you as their person, they don’t know any better, they spend all their time with you and they think, “Oh this is my person coming for me, she’s back here now.” And it’s hard to see them look at you and know that they won’t be there the next day, that’s always very hard. (Lauren)

Well, there’s feelings of hopelessness I guess. I suppose it’s a little scary at times too. Definitely sad. Sometimes I’m made to feel somehow defensive in decisions when being questioned or discussing decisions and having to be the one to step back and look at things without all the emotional attachment some others might have. (Mary)

3.2.4.5. **Volume of animals.** Nine participants, from six different shelter locations, spoke about the volume of animals in their shelters as contributing to strain. One participant explained that the high volume of animals contributes to an unstable, stressful environment.

It’s just sort of a time bomb or a jail; there’s too many animals, they’re all too high-stressed, they don’t get what they need and you just feel like the place is going to self-destruct. It never does but you feel like one day they’re going to overthrow you and revolt because there’s just not enough to go around. (Judith)

3.2.4.6. **Overwhelming increases in workload.** The most common theme in the *volume of animals* category, reported by six of the nine participants, involved the seasonal peaks, that is, during parvo season, summer, and Christmas, and unexpected, sudden increases in volume that result in an overwhelming increase in workload. The participants described having to make difficult decisions in terms of balancing the care of animals already in the system with the process of in-taking new animals that may be in need of urgent medical treatment.

The demands are sometimes extremely high. You can have seizures of up to 76 cats, somebody was breeding cats in a warehouse, and all of the cats come in at the same time. So not only do staff get stressed out because, “Oh my god there’s 76 cats coming in today,” but we have to finish feeding and cleaning all these cats [already here], we have to do all these treatments. (Susan)

We just did a removal of over 100 cats from a hoarding situation, so this is a stressful situation, we had to find space for them - they all need medication – the whole situation is
stressful for the amount of work that was put on our shelter that was already busy. It’s stressful because we’re at full capacity already and now we have 100 extra, so it’s my job to make sure they’re all medicated and healthy. It’s stressful because every department is put under stress by it. (Nancy)

It’s just the day to day going in and taking care of the extra animals plus the ones we already had, there’s no way it can’t be stressful – there’s no way it can’t be extra work – everyone is worked so hard and is very tired right now. (Nancy)

We take in injured wildlife as well so in the summertime especially it tends to be we’re overwhelmed with, practically all day long, injured rabbits, injured birds, all sorts of injured animals so after a while it does tend to get very stressful. You don’t want to see one more baby rabbit that’s been chewed by a dog. I guess seeing the injuries, seeing the animals suffering, dealing with people. (Sarah)

One participant said that it was the build-up of strain during these high seasons, rather than any one individual event, that contributed to her individual strain and eventually needing time off. When asked for further information about what is stressful about a high volume or unexpected influx of animals, one participant explained that it was both being exposed to more animal suffering along with dealing with more human clients and the unique strain associated with those interactions. Others explained that it was the risk of disease that comes with a sudden influx of animals, the diminishing quality of care in staff, and the pressure to rush life and death decisions because of the need for space that contributes to individual strain.

3.2.4.7. Animal relationship stressors. Seventeen participants from six different shelter locations described their interactions with the animals in their shelter as contributing to strain. All 17 participants, without prompting, referred primarily to the dogs in their shelter in their responses. The following themes emerged within this category: Bonding with shelter animals; and witnessing animal suffering.

3.2.4.7.1. Bonding with shelter animals. The most common theme in the animal relationship category, reported by 12 out of the 17 participants, involved the strain associated
with becoming attached, or bonding, with particular shelter animals. These 12 participants explained that the longer a dog stays in the shelter, a stronger bond may be created as employees work and care for them on a daily basis and, in some cases, begin to view the dog as their own. This sense of attachment can make it difficult and sometimes “heartbreaking” to hand the dog over to adopters and accept that someone else could care for the animal as well as they do. They also noted that when euthanasia becomes an option for an animal that they have bonded with, it feels like a decision is being made on a personal pet, intensifying the impact of the loss. One participant explained that she wanted to spend quality time with each animal but at the same time wanted to protect herself from the emotional impact of the inevitable loss of the animals. Several participants described avoiding attachment to at-risk animals because of how hard a previous experience of loss was; they described feeling like they lost a piece of themselves, empty, heartbroken, and sad. One participant noted that when she is the first contact an animal has upon being admitted to the shelter she feels a greater bond and responsibility toward the animal because of the history they share, increasing the emotional intensity of the outcome.

You get passionate and for whatever reason, and it’s hard to pinpoint, you get attached to certain ones and you feel like if you lose that one you’re losing it for everybody. (Judith)

I can’t tell you how much sleep I lost over that dog. I never ever want to become attached to a dog in a shelter like that again because I literally felt like I was sealing the fate of my own animal and I don’t want to do that. (Amanda)

First off, there’s so many of them but when you build a relationship with one it’s hard to see them go. It’s also hard to accept someone else being as good an owner as you, which sounds awful but I hear that a lot at work. People feel that way. Most of us at the shelter, we have our own animals. We’re usually at our legal limit and we would move heaven and earth for them so when you bond with an animal you often get super critical of who might be interested in them. We have adoption counsellors, who when they have a special relationship with a dog, they’ll specifically say, “Don’t book any adoption meetings with me,” because they’re going to be super harsh on that person and not thing they’re good enough even though we have pretty strict adoption policies. (Trudi)
It feels like at first you feel like you want to have [a special bond] with all the animals and then the longer you do it and you recognize how big a task this is and you can’t do it all yourself you start to realize rationally you can’t have that with everyone...and also for your own self-protection because things happen and we’ve all got our own animals that are going to break our hearts someday. It’s difficult. (Trudi)

I took the dog in and I find those are the most emotional; the ones you take in yourself versus you come in and there’s a dog, there’s a dog and you don’t even know how they got here. But when I actually take the dog out of the truck or I take the dog from the person at that counter I find there’s more of a history with me and that dog if that makes any sense ... So when I take it out of the back of the truck and it licks me well guess what? I’m the first interaction with that dog so those ones I tend to give a little bit more. It’s the history. When I was on the road and picked up an animal I would always check, “How’s my guy that I brought in? How’s he doing?” because you’re the one that picked him up ... So once you’ve touched it, you’ve put it in this environment, so I feel that maybe it’s just that. I brought you here and I want to bring you somewhere safe. I don’t want to be bringing you to your last destination. (Jessica)

I really try to avoid [viewing animal as my own]. It happens every now and then but it would kill someone working at a shelter, it would just destroy them. It does happen and I’ve been lucky with...my first dog was adopted to a wonderful home, she’s doing wonderfully. My second did not do so well. She was one of those dogs that came in fabulous and deteriorated and eventually she attacked another dog and I was there when it happened ... So I witnessed it and of course after that happened the decision was clear; she wanted to harm them but she went from our best playgroup dog to a dog that would injure a sweet dog that wasn’t doing anything to her. And that one really really tore me up for a couple of days for sure. That was a bad one ... for a few minutes I just sat in the yard and kinda sobbed for a while, you know, I wasn’t prepared for it, it was very draining, I just had to scream at and try to remove a dog that I knew very well from another dog, so it was very exhausting. And all day I was on the verge of tears a little bit and I think part of it is my relationship and part of it would be adrenaline ... I held her for her euthanasia. It was right after the fight, I think I still had some blood on my hands from the other dog ... it was very sad. It was kind of heartbreaking. It was a dog that I had given, I took her out every day, I came in on my days off, I gave her every opportunity I could. And there was something inside of her that could not live her life in a shelter. So I couldn’t have done anything with her. But if it wasn’t getting her into a home early enough it wasn’t going to fix her. And that was a real epiphany for me. That was really tough. I spent a lot of time with her. (Lauren)
3.2.4.7.2. Witnessing animal suffering. Eleven of the 17 participants with responses that fell within the animal relationship category described experiencing strain associated with witnessing animal suffering on the job. They explained that seeing the conditions of animals being picked up or brought into the shelter, be it the consequences of abuse, neglect, and injuries, can be stressful. They also reported witnessing the deterioration of dogs, in terms of behaviour and health, staying in the shelter long term, as stressful. The participants described this deterioration as particularly difficult to observe when they felt the dog could do well in a home environment but does not cope well with the shelter environment and transforms from a dog they have bonded with into a dog they can longer trust. One participant described the experience as “watching a life collapse in front of you.”

But for the most part the negative is seeing some of the conditions of the animals that do come in. (Susan)

I think that was the ultimate level of stress for me; you could see animals that very much needed attention, that you almost felt would be better if they were being euthanized, you know, in a kill-shelter setting where euthanasia is done prior to them being sick or injured, but then that’s where your emotional turmoil comes in because then I’m admitting that I’d like to kill healthy dogs. (Judith)

Yeah, and [the dogs] break down. Oh yeah. Not all dogs, nor should they be, I would say like 1% of dogs, are able to handle that high stress environment and come out of it and be a normal dog without some serious help … And that was the biggest heart break of it was when you had a dog that you’d see the promise in as a young dog, you would watch him fade away, you would know their time was coming and they would get in that dog fight, bite that person, get an illness, you know, something that you knew was going to come on from the stress of living there... (Judith)

The most stressful thing for me is when I see an animal that I know is going to do fine or has a very good chance of doing just fine in a normal home environment but is not handling the shelter environment very well. (Wendy)

... Going into the room and knowing we’ve gone through that list of things that we’re trying to do to make it better for that particular animal and yet we’re unable to do that and so while that animal’s there it’s experiencing a stress that you can’t necessarily resolve. (Andrea)
We take in injured wildlife as well so in the summertime especially it tends to be we’re overwhelmed with, practically all day long, injured rabbits, injured birds, all sorts of injured animals so after a while it does tend to get very stressful. You don’t want to see one more baby rabbit that’s been chewed by a dog. (Sarah)

Just seeing, not necessarily euthanizing, but seeing, injured or hurt animals can be stressful. What else is stressful about the job is watching dogs have to sit in their kennels ... It’s stressful knowing that from 7pm to 8:30am they’re sitting in their kennels. Now, they may not go outside in a home environment either but it’s not a kennel and a lot of times they’re sitting in their own urine and feces in the morning if they’re not housebroken. (Anna)

A big stressor is watching the dogs that come in and have excellent skills and pass the tests with flying colors and do everything right and we think they’re going to succeed, to look at this, a pitbull that’s going to a kennel that waits for adoption for months and months and months and we watch them deteriorate and go from an excellent dog that would fit into a family with dogs and cats and everything to a dog that has become a danger because they’re trapped in a kennel. And we get them out two or three times a day, we give them enrichment, we give them playgroups, but something snaps, they’re not meant to be confined for that long. So we just watch a life collapse...that’s pretty stressful. That’s one of the worst parts. (Lauren)

Well I tend to be a real advocate for the pit bull and their high energy nature, they’re like high energy larger dogs that’s going to happen to them eventually, usually, and that, it just kills me, because we do everything we can and it gets very very emotional because at the end they go from dogs that were our best friends to dogs that we can’t trust anymore. And it’s not their fault, so it’s very stressful. (Lauren)

It’s pretty awful to see some of the horrific things that come in; we had a dog that was very badly burned in a house fire that we’ve been treating since ... So there’s a lot of special cases that you become very emotionally involved in. Certainly when they’re successful those are the high high highs, and when something like our cocker spaniel that we lost despite your best effort, you know, that’s very upsetting. (Mary)

3.3. Trauma Symptoms

Based on the literature review, it was anticipated that symptoms of trauma would be revealed in the interview data as prompts addressed responses to stress and coping strategies.

The reader will recall that compassion fatigue, a construct that has been applied to animal shelter
workers, has been said to involve intrusive imagery, avoidance, hyperarousal, distressing emotions, cognitive changes, functional impairment and other symptoms described as the costs of caring (see Table 1). As noted in Chapter 1, the symptoms of perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) are thought to align with the PTSD criteria of intrusion, avoidance and numbing, and arousal (APA, 2000) as well as involve increases in anxiety, panic, depression, substance abuse, paranoia, disintegration, and dissociation or amnesia during the trauma (MacNair, 2002).

The interviews were analysed for elements of the constructs of compassion fatigue and perpetration-induced trauma. These collections of symptoms were not explicitly endorsed or implied by participants with one exception.

The participant who had recently left her job noted that she became more aware of her symptoms of anxiety, avoidance, and intrusive thoughts after leaving her job at an animal shelter.

I had a lot of anxiety and I was very torn between still passionately wanting to be involved in working there and also never wanting to go back ever again and that’s been, unfortunately, a similar experience with a lot of my coworkers as well. It’s like you can’t let it go. It’s all you think about. Once a day I think about that place and it has a pervasiveness in being the best and worst job you ever had because there’s so many emotions on the line and so many people that you work with that share similar interests to you but then you also have to suffer through traumatic events as well with them. All of that comes into play for sure but you walk away from it and think ‘Well it was just a job. I’ll get another job. It’s not like I was in a war. It’s just a job’, but it’s really not when there’s that many lives being born and lost in it. There’s so many emotions that come into play that people don’t acknowledge. (Judith)

3.4. Summary of Results

Qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interview data revealed 17 stressor categories and 32 themes within these categories (see Table 3), representing a broad summary of what animal shelter workers find stressful about their job. When these stressor categories were compared with the generic occupational stressor model, discussed in the introduction, 11 out of
the 17 did indeed fit with existing categories. That is, participant concerns were expressed that aligned with the model’s generic occupational stress categories of job contents and demands (see Exposure to risks and hazards), physical environment, workload, scheduling (see Scheduling and vacation time), organizational roles (see Responsibility for staff), work relationships (see Work relationships and conflict, and Volunteers), career development, organizational factors (see Financial health of shelter and Management and policy issues), and work-life interface. Within these generic categories, however, both generic and shelter specific themes emerged.

The remaining six categories that emerged in the data did not fit within the generic occupational stress model. These categories included animal relationship stressors, euthanasia issues, human clients, public perception, responsibility for life, and volume of animals. These categories appear to represent sources of stress unique to shelter work and are defined by their shelter specific themes.

Table 3

Summary of Occupational Stressors Reported by Shelter Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Characteristics and Nature of Work</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Environment</td>
<td>Concerns about physical layout of workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noise levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Risks and Hazards</td>
<td>Aggressive and unpredictable human clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aggressive and dangerous animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for Staff</td>
<td>Feel responsible for emotional reactions of their staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concern for safety of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling and Vacation Time</td>
<td>Guilt when taking time off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untraditional work schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>Quantitative overload</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Social and Organizational Context of Work</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory remuneration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers</td>
<td>Standards not Enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Health of Shelter</td>
<td>Limited organizational funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and Policy Issues</td>
<td>Disconnect between management and front line workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific policies and their implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication between management and front line workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Relationships and Conflict</td>
<td>Differing interpretations of animal behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposing workplace cliques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Individual Related Stressors</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work-home Interface</td>
<td>Strain-based conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time-based conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Shelter Specific Stressors</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal Relationship Stressors</td>
<td>Bonding with shelter animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Witnessing animal suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthanasia Issues</td>
<td>Euthanasia decision making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performing euthanasia and its aftermath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Clients</td>
<td>How human clients interact with staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How human clients treat their own animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Perception</td>
<td>Shelter work associated with euthanasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assumption that all shelters are the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assumption that shelter workers do not care about the animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception that no-kill shelters are morally superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for Life</td>
<td>Sense of responsibility for the outcomes of animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume of Animals</td>
<td>Seasonal peaks and unexpected increases in volume</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4

Discussion

There is a general lack of peer-reviewed research examining stress in animal shelter workers, and in particular, research that does not begin with a pre-existing assumption that euthanasia is the most stressful part of the job. The purpose of the present study was to address this gap in the literature by using qualitative methods to document and classify aspects of shelter work that employees report as stressful. The semi-structured interview style allowed for the use of prompts to address concerns brought up in previous literature but also allowed the interviewee the space to explore their experiences of occupational stress without the boundaries of explicit research assumptions. Using this methodology, we expected to gain a broader understanding of what shelter workers experience as stressful, compared to the information available in the literature to date. An additional purpose of this study was to explore whether current perspectives on factors contributing to generic occupational stress, and the constructs of compassion fatigue and perpetration-induced trauma, are sufficient to describe the experiences of animal shelter workers.

4.1. Animal Shelter Stressors and Existing Occupational Stress Models

The current study found that 11 of the total of 17 stressor categories that emerged from the data fit with the model described in Chapter 1. The themes within these 11 categories, however, often revealed very shelter specific concerns that may not be fully captured by the generic category titles. In fact, only the themes of untraditional work schedules, quantitative overload, and unsatisfactory remuneration addressed purely generic workplace concerns that could potentially be found across different occupations. All other themes in these 11 categories addressed either both generic and shelter specific concerns or solely shelter specific concerns.
These remaining themes are unique in that they appear to primarily arise from participants’ concern about the shelter animals’ well-being. For example, rather than expressing concerns about insufficient vacation time within the *Scheduling and Vacation Time* category, participants’ most commonly reported stressor concerned the guilt they experienced when taking sick or vacation time due to concern about the quality of care the animals would receive in their absence. Similarly, all reported work relationship conflicts arose out of differing interpretations of animal behavior or differing approaches to animal care. Although ego may be involved, participants’ responses in this area expressed a sincere concern about the consequences of these professional differences on the animals. Clearly, any research or practical occupational stress interventions in an animal shelter environment would have to be aware of shelter specific, and most often animal specific, concerns potentially being hidden within generic stressor categories.

### 4.2. Sources of Occupational Stress Unique to Shelter Work

While the 11 categories discussed above fit with the generic occupational stress model, albeit with many themes that ultimately arose from shelter specific concerns, six categories that emerged in our data did not fit within the existing occupational stressor model. These categories, including *animal relationship stressors, euthanasia issues, human clients, public perception, responsibility for life, and volume of animals*, may be considered sources of stress unique to work in the animal shelter environment. Considering these results, current models of occupational stress do not appear sufficient to explain the experiences of animal shelter workers. This finding supports Figley and Roop’s (2006) proposal that adoption rates, relationships with human and animal clients, a sense of indispensability, and public perceptions may be potential stressors for shelter workers in addition to euthanasia related stress. The current study expanded upon Figley and Roop’s suggested stressor categories by revealing several unique themes within
the categories, allowing researchers a more intimate view into what shelter workers experience as stressful.

In the current study, it was specifically the bonding with shelter animals theme, within the *animal relationship stressors* category, that appeared to permeate and intensify many other stressors. In particular, it appears closely related to the *responsibility for life* category, in that when a shelter worker bonds with a particular animal they tend to take on a surrogate owner role, and therefore feel a sense of responsibility for the outcome of that animal while both in the shelter environment and when adopted or euthanized. The resulting sense of responsibility toward a particular animal appears to be a core factor that makes the circumstances surrounding all other shelter specific occupational stressors more intensely personal to the worker and therefore more stressful than if the responsibility were not present. A failed adoption, a euthanasia decision, the deterioration of an animal’s behavior over time, or even an animal being alone at the shelter overnight begin to represent personal failures when the sense of responsibility is present.

These results support the idea that euthanasia is not the only shelter specific stressor experienced by animal shelter workers. Indeed, its interpretation as a strain may be influenced by one or more of the other five shelter specific stressors reported by participants. Certainly, as described above, the relationship a worker has with the animal plays a role in the level of strain experienced in response to euthanasia. In addition to this factor, strain in reaction to euthanasia appears to be also closely associated with a lack of communication between front-line workers and management, a lack of participation in the decision-making process, the sense of one’s opinion not being valued by decision makers, and the knowledge that alternatives could be considered with more organizational funding or space. If the interactions between these stressors
were acknowledged and addressed in practice, it is possible the strain associated with euthanasia would be alleviated or, at least, employees would have the information they require to better cope with the decision. A research focus solely on euthanasia as a stressor in isolation does not provide a complete picture of stress specific to animal shelter workers. Euthanasia as an occupational stressor must be considered alongside the other shelter specific stressors revealed in the current study in order for practical interventions to be implemented successfully.

4.3. Trauma and Shelter Work

Only one participant reported signs of trauma. Whether her experience is idiosyncratic or represents a more common issue among a larger sample of shelter workers, both past and present, would require further research to confirm. However, it was noted that many participants expressed an almost obsessive need to talk about their workplace experiences; this aligns with behavior reported in a paper on PITS in abortion nurses and doctors (Hern & Corrigan, 1978). This may hint at a shared experience between shelter workers and abortion practitioners but an obsessive need to talk does not fit with current DSM-IV PTSD symptomology. Clearly, there was not enough information in the current data to determine whether compassion fatigue or PITS can sufficiently describe the experience of shelter workers. However, as the data suggest that euthanasia is not the sole precipitating event for strain in shelter workers, PITS does not explain the strain experienced by those not directly involved in performing euthanasia.

There are several reasons why trauma symptoms may not have been observed in the data. The methodology of the current study did not make use of any standardized measure of trauma nor did interview prompts specifically ask about trauma symptoms. The goal, rather, was to see whether participants would offer such information spontaneously in response to general coping
prompts. With the exception of the former employee in mind, however, it is possible that the lack of trauma symptoms in the data may indicate that emotional reactions to shelter work become clearer after employees gain distance from the job or that employees are more willing to examine the full range and consequences of their emotions after leaving. It is also possible that those workers who experience trauma simply leave the job.

4.4. Limitations

The following are limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of the current study. First, the diversity and characteristics of the sample may have been impacted by a self-selection bias that could potentially affect the results. That is, there may be a number of differences between those who chose to participate in the study and those who did not. The characteristics of those who did not participate are unknown. However, it could be speculated that the current sample included those who were more stressed than those who did not participate, those who were not afraid of potentially being identified by employers, and those who were willing and comfortable enough to speak with a stranger about their feelings. Similarly, as the distribution of the information letter depended on the director of any particular animal shelter being motivated to participate, the study may have included only shelters with a particular organizational climate. Therefore, the sample used in the current study may not be representative of the entire population of animal shelter workers.

The semi-structured interview format is advantageous in that it has the potential to yield highly detailed information. The interviewer has the opportunity to expand upon the participants’ individual experiences through follow-up questions and probes. The format also allows the interviewer to clarify misinterpretations of questions in the moment increasing the
validity of the results. The interview, however, naturally can only capture the thoughts and feelings of an individual at one moment in time and the content of their responses may depend on their comfort level with the interviewer and the topic being discussed. In future studies, the inclusion of quantitative measures of occupational stress and trauma symptoms in addition to the interview may overcome these limitations and provide opportunity for comparisons.

4.5. Future Directions

The current data point to several potential areas for future research. First, some participants hypothesized that area of education and/or education level may be associated with shelter workers’ experience of occupational strain. Shelter workers deal with daily stressors similar to those working with any vulnerable population and frequently are witness to their clients’ deaths, and yet they tend to have little to no education that those in similar careers, such as medicine and other helping professions, benefit from in order to help them understand and cope with their personal emotional reactions. One veterinary technician in the current study suggested that the people in her department may be less vulnerable to the stress of shelter work, compared to those in positions that do not have specific education requirements, because they have a better understanding of medical issues and the repercussions if a particular animal is not euthanized. She also noted that her education included training in the ethics of euthanasia and coping with grief. Future research could further explore this potential link between level and nature of education and the experience of strain in animal shelter workers.

The results of the current study revealed that strain in shelter workers is often associated with not understanding the reasoning behind euthanasia decisions and general policy decisions. As this study sought to identify aspects of shelter work reported as stressful, some interview data
describing factors associated with resilience were not reported in the results. It was observed, however, that those participants who understood the reasoning behind decisions being made about euthanasia and shelter policy tended to report being better able to cope with the stresses of their daily work and better manage their emotional reactions. It should be noted that it is often those employees who work directly with the animals in terms of their daily care, rather than medical care, and tend to report very close bonds with the animals, who are less involved in decision making and yet potentially the most impacted by the life and death decisions being made. Further research into resilience factors in animal shelter workers could work toward confirming this possible association between understanding the reasoning behind euthanasia and policy decisions and coping with strain.

Finally, it became apparent, as interviews progressed, that the experience of strain in animal shelter workers depends, to some degree, on the position held by the individual. Veterinary technicians, animal care attendants, adoption counsellors, front desk workers, supervisors/managers, and members of the Board of Directors, all have very different daily tasks and, importantly for the topic at hand, significantly different amounts and nature of contact with the animals. What individuals find stressful in one position may be quite different from what is found stressful in another position. Therefore, while the inclusion of a spectrum of positions in the current study provided a broad survey of what shelter workers, collectively, find stressful about their work, it may be beneficial for future studies to separate participants by position to gain an understanding of stressors unique to each position and allow for comparisons.
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Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) (2007). Canada’s health care providers. Ottawa: CIHI.


Appendix A
Recruitment Flyer

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND ANIMAL SHELTER WORKERS

The job of working in an animal shelter can be stressful. As part of our interest in the human-animal bond we would like to understand that stress. We are looking for volunteers who would be willing to be interviewed. The interviews will take about an hour at a time and at a place convenient for you, or by phone. In recognition of your time we will donate $25.00 to your shelter.

Who are we? We are Marg Schneider, professor in the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology and Jesse Roberts, a student in the M.A. program in the same department.

If you would like to volunteer or find out more about the study, please contact:

Jesse Roberts at: jsamuel.roberts@mail.utoronto.ca
Marg Schneider at: margaret.schneider@utoronto.ca
Appendix B

Letter to Shelter Directors and Informed Consent Form

Dear ______________

This is a follow up to our email/telephone conversation about the possibility that (name of organization) might assist us in contacting potential research participants. As you know, I’m a professor at the University of Toronto. One of my research interests is the human-animal bond. My students and I have done research on topics including grief following the loss of a companion animal, the mental health benefits of a therapeutic riding program, and whether the presence of a dog increases the likeability of therapists. One of the topics that interests me and my students that has received very little attention is occupational stress among people who work in animal shelters. Therefore, my graduate student, Jesse Roberts and I are looking for people who work in animal shelters to help us understand the experience of stress on the job.

We were hoping that your organization would be able to assist us in contacting potential research participants. That would involve one or more of the following: posting flyers on your organization’s bulletin board, distributing hard copies of information letters, distributing electronic copies of information letters. Before you decide, we can tell you a bit about the study.

We would like to interview shelter workers about their experiences working in a shelter. The interview will take about an hour and will explore their personal experience of work-related stress. In recognition of the time involved, we will donate $25.00 to the shelter.

Due to the nature of the study, the topics discussed during the interview may raise uncomfortable issues. However, we anticipate that the kinds of information we will be discussing are similar to issues they have discussed with colleagues in the past. Therefore, we don’t anticipate that they will experience any significant discomfort. We hope that by publishing the results of the study and presenting the results at conferences we can contribute to the understanding of stress among these employees.

All the information provided will be confidential. Interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recordings are transcribed, the recording will be erased. All identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. Neither the participant’s name nor the name of the shelter will be associated with this study.

If you are able to help us out or have questions about the study, please contact me at the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto: margaret.schneider@utoronto.ca or at 416-978-0684.
You can also contact Jesse Roberts at the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto at: jsamuel.roberts@mail.utoronto.ca

You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 with questions about the rights of research participants.

I will take the liberty of following up in a few weeks by email or phone if I haven’t heard from you. Thanks for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Margaret Schneider, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
University of Toronto
Occupational Stress Among Shelter Workers: Consent Form

I have read the attached information letter and agree to assist in recruiting participants for the study.

____________________________________________ (signature)

____________________________________________ (date)
Appendix C

Information Letter and Consent Form

Occupational Stress and Animal Shelter Workers

My name is Marg Schneider, and I’m a professor at the University of Toronto. One of my research interests is the human-animal bond. My students and I have done research on topics including grief following the loss of a companion animal, the mental health benefits of a therapeutic riding program, and whether the presence of a dog increases the likeability of therapists. One of the topics that interests me and my students that has received very little attention is occupational stress among people who work in animal shelters. Therefore, my graduate student, Jesse Roberts and I are looking for people like yourself who work in animal shelters to help us understand your experience of stress on the job. As an animal shelter employee your insight will be of great value in this emerging field of study.

We would like to interview you about your experiences working in a shelter. The interview will take about an hour and will explore your personal experience of work-related stress. The interview can be face-to-face at a time and place convenient for you, or it can be over the phone. We are interested in learning about what aspects of the job are most stressful, how you deal with stress and how factors in the workplace such as your relationship with colleagues and with the animals can affect stress. In recognition of the time involved, we will donate $25.00 to your shelter.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can decline to answer any particular question, and you can withdraw and end the interview at any time and without consequence. You can also decide to withdraw your interview information up until the time we analyze it. We will make the donation even if you decide to withdraw.

Due to the nature of the study, the topics discussed during the interview may raise uncomfortable issues. However, we anticipate that the kinds of information we will be discussing are similar to issues you have discussed with colleagues in the past. Therefore, we don’t anticipate that you will experience any significant discomfort. We hope that by publishing the results of the study and presenting the results at conferences we can contribute to the understanding of stress among people like yourself.

All the information you provide will be confidential. Interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recordings are transcribed, the recording will be erased. All identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. Your name and the name of your shelter will not be associated with this study.
If you are interested in participating in this study or have questions about the study, please contact me at the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto: margaret.schneider@utoronto.ca or at 416-978-0684.

You can also contact Jesse Roberts at the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto at: jesse.roberts@utoronto.ca

You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 with questions about the rights of research participants.

Thanks for considering participating in this study.
Occupational Stress among Shelter Workers: Consent Form

I have read the attached information letter and agree to participate in the study.

____________________________________________ (signature)

____________________________________________ (date)
Appendix D

Interview Checklist

Occupational Stress among Shelter Workers: Semi-Structured Interview

Working in an animal shelter can be both rewarding and stressful. I’d like to know about your experience. As you know, this study is mostly about stress, but I’d like to hear about both sides of your experience. Please start wherever you want and tell me about how the job is for you.

Potential sources of stress that we would like to explore during the course of the interview:

Are any of the following sources of stress, and if so, can you elaborate?

Your relationship with the animals
Human clients
Relationships with colleagues
Physical layout of the shelter
Public perceptions of shelters
Management

What is the most stressful aspect of the job? Can you give me one example of a stressful situation?

How does the stress have an impact on you?
What are your strategies for dealing with stress?
What are the sources of support that you have in dealing with workplace stress?
How did you get involved in shelter work initially? (ask about training, formal and informal, professional development opportunities, etc.)
Do you have anything else to add that I need to know in order to understand stress in shelters?
Is there anything that the public needs to understand about your work?
Before we wrap up, can I get some background information?
Is your shelter a no-kill shelter?
How long have you worked in shelters altogether?
Your age:

I know that sometimes this topic can be quite emotional. How are you feeling about the interview?
Appendix E

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