

APPLIED SOCIOLOGY AND ANIMAL ADVOCACY: CREATING A COMMUNITY CATS COALITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper represents an autoethnography of the creation of a county-wide, all volunteer Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program in Northeast Ohio. Both descriptive and reflective, this examination is intended to accomplish two goals. The first goal, as a description, is that I will provide the history and evolution of a specific TNR program (i.e. the Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County) and the results of trapping and fixing community cats in the first year of running the program. Secondly, through reflection, I will present a personal narrative of “lessons learned”. This narrative will briefly present my personal discovery, examination, and considerations of the subcultures of colony cat care providers and feeders as well as the subcultures of TNR advocates and practitioners. Both macro-level and micro-level considerations are included through a brief introduction to working with organizations, volunteers, and with members of the community. Further participation in volunteer work with a TNR program will undoubtedly lead me to engage in additional examination and reflection across these subcultures and organizations.

KEYWORDS: Trap-Neuter-Return, TNR, community cats, feral cats, stray cats, spay/neuter

THIS IS MY STORY: A DESCRIPTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

As a descriptive autoethnography, it is my intent to describe the formation of the Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County (CCCAC, aka “The Coalition”), its evolution, and the results of the first year of trapping and neutering stray cats in this county in Northeast Ohio. Additionally, through reflection, I will engage in sociological introspection in an attempt to connect my understanding of these experiences for the reader; that is, a “meaning-making” by transforming my experiences into the language of a sociologist (Muncey 2010).

Chang (2016) writes that an autoethnography may stem from personal experience had by the author or springs forward from the researcher’s professional interest. For me, the two are so tightly interwoven that it is difficult to state which motive preceded the other. On the one hand, my involvement in the October 2019 city council meeting that led to the development of the CCCAC sprang from my work in animal advocacy. There was no intent to speak to the council as an academician, but rather, as a resident of the community who had insight to the issues at hand. My offer to help residents of the community organize into a

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problem-solving group would utilize my training in applied sociology, experience in the non-profit sector, and draw from relationships I already had with a variety of animal welfare agencies in the county. On the other hand, when COVID-19 thwarted my Sabbatical plans, I saw an opportunity to substitute my original international community development and animal advocacy plans with the local community-based animal advocacy that I was now developing.

There is no “one-size fits all” type of autoethnography. While four types of autoethnographies have been described by Chang (2008:141-148), which are “imaginative-creative writing”, “confessional-emotive writing”, “descriptive-realist writing”, and “analytical-interpretative writing”, it is often found that styles are combined making for great variations in this writing method. Indeed, I will write primarily in a descriptive style but will include elements of the interpretative style. The descriptive portion of this paper is a case study of “how” a coalition was created, including the need for the coalition, the changes that occurred in the first year of its being, the impact that the coalition had on the community, and, as an individual autoethnography, the role I played. The interpretative portion will examine the relationships between The Coalition and the various players, such as cat colony caretakers, feeders, and animal welfare agencies in the form of “Lessons Learned”.

However, the voice that is not heard in this examination are those of the direct recipients of the services offered through the TNR program – the cats themselves. Unlike other autoethnographies involving vulnerable populations, the cats who are trapped and neutered, and occasionally rehomed when circumstances make their return to a dangerous situation unethical, do not have the ability to refuse the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) service.

COMMUNITY CATS AND COALITION BUILDING – DOING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Research in community coalition building may be found in works including Kegler and Swan (2012), Wolff (2001), Berkowitz (2001), Zakocs and Guckenbug (2007), Granner and Sharpe (2004), and Zakocs and Edwards (2006). These works, however, represent coalition and capacity building in health promotion and healthy communities (e.g. drug abuse prevention, teenage pregnancy prevention, tobacco use prevention). However, when a literature review for “community cats and coalitions” was conducted, I found no results. Instead, I found articles on perceptions of community cats (e.g. Van Patter et al. 2019, Loyd 2012), implementing non-lethal solutions to managing community cats (e.g. Hamilton 2019, Spehar 2015), the evaluation of feral cat management programs (e.g. Loyd and DeVore 2010, Hughes and Slater 2002), cohabitation with community cats (e.g. Jaroš 2021), characteristics of community cat care providers (Centonze and Levy 2002, Gunther et al. 2016), early de-sexing of cats as a method to reduce the unowned cat populations (Mazeau et al. 2021), and articles on domestic cats’ predatory behavior on wildlife (e.g. Crowley et al. 2020).

In fact, the literature surrounding community cats and feral cat management appears to focus on the success of TNR programs which are mostly instituted by government agencies (Gibson 2002). Non-profit organizations, such as Alley Cat Allies, a national group advocating for TNR to address feral cat management, or local and national Humane Society groups, can be found in the non-academic literature (e.g. websites). The CCCAC is unique not only with regard to its formation as a grass-roots group but also with its success. For example, a newly begun TNR program examined for its effectiveness on Prince Edward Island had a sample size of 185

cats (Gibson 2002) as compared to the first year TNR of 510 cats by the CCCAC (Terry 2020a, Terry 2020d).

Mithani and O'Brien (2021) discuss coalition building within an organization as an attempt to synthesize academic literature that has been said to be "fragmented" (:171). Although the emphasis in this discussion was "coalitions within an organization", the emphasis in this work was on the individuals in that coalition. Stating that a coalition "consists of individuals who, despite their persistent differences, work together to pursue a mutually beneficial goal" (:171) this definition captures the essence of the CCCAC. That is, the CCCAC represents individuals, many of whom hold membership or are affiliated with an organization, and who have come together to address the community's concerns of "too many stray cats." Members of the CCCAC include a county official, a city Animal Control Officer, paid staff and volunteers with several local animal welfare agencies, business owners, and self-described "animal advocates".

Nonetheless, other than pursuing the same goal (i.e. reducing the stray/feral cat population in the community) there appears to be little else that connects these diverse individuals. In fact, several of the key players in The Coalition do not even reside in Ashtabula County. It has been said that there is strength in diversity and this truism is evidenced in the successes of The Coalition. Rather than individual members volunteering within an echo chamber, where ideas and beliefs are reinforced in such a way that rebuttal or contrary values do not emerge, the membership's diverse constituencies ensure that frank exchanges of ideas are presented.

Coalition characteristics identified by Mithani and O'Brien (2021) include: interacting group, deliberately constructed, issue oriented, independent of formal organization's structure, lack of formal internal structure, mutual perception of membership, external focus, and concerted member action. For these characteristics, it is suggested that the CCCAC meets most, if not arguably all, of these characteristics. Members of the CCCAC are in weekly contact (e.g. interacting group), are addressing an unmet community need via creating a TNR program (e.g. deliberately constructed and issue oriented), have created a sense of membership and identity through choosing a name, having a logo, and having designed a volunteer T-Shirt (mutual perception of membership), work as a group to benefit the community (e.g. external focus), and are a hands on, working group trapping, transporting, caring for, and ultimately releasing or rehoming community cats (e.g. concerted member action). Because members of The Coalition are not a part of a single formal organization but may belong to other organizations, by definition, the CCCAC is independent of the formal organization's structure.

On the other hand, while the CCCAC meets coalition characteristics enumerated above, the theoretical research streams identified by Mithani and O'Brien (2021) are not adequate. However, with the CCCAC's short term goal to bring a county-funded TNR program (in lieu of volunteer efforts and donations) to fruition and a long-term goal to bring a spay/neuter clinic to the county, a future examination within a formal organization is anticipated.

In his 2004 address to the American Sociological Association, former ASA President Michael Burawoy called upon sociologists to recommit to public sociology. He has been a leading proponent to a return to engaging the public. While there is no agreed upon definition of "public sociology", the term is often associated with Burawoy's perspective (2005a). Similarly,

Piven (2007:158) defined public sociology as “the uses of sociological knowledge to address public, and therefore, political problems” and further maintained that “public sociologists treat public problems as the important part of our research agenda.” Additionally, Piven states that it is important to communicate to the public not only what was discovered during an academic examination but to act upon those discoveries. As did Heller earlier, Piven also makes the claim that informing political debate was a “return to roots” for sociology (Heller 2003, Piven 2007).

David Brady, in a presentation at the 2004 North Carolina Sociological Association meeting, and prepared in an article through the University of North Carolina Press, opined “that public sociology essentially involves two ideas: reaching a public audience and serving to improve the public’s well-being” (Brady 2004:1629). Although Brady would enumerate shortcomings to the agenda of Burawoy’s public sociology, the idea that sociology as a social science demanding greater public attention is one many sociologists could support. Indeed, my own reason for becoming involved in the debate surrounding Ashtabula residents’ concerns about “what to do with community cats” was driven, in part, by my sociological training.

Nonetheless, Burawoy (2005a:4) stated that the “challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways.” Here, I say “challenge accepted.” As a sociologist, organizing a TNR initiative, with the long-term goal of bringing a spay/neuter clinic to the county, is “doing sociology.” That is to say, a sociological understanding of group behavior and group dynamics, social structure, decision making styles and leadership, conflict resolution, and groupthink, are central to organizational success. This academic knowledge is then put to use in the community through action; the “roll up your sleeves and let’s get to work” activism that results in change.

In the following pages, I will demonstrate how “multiple publics” are engaged “in multiple ways”. This paper will contribute to the academic literature in that coalition building by individual volunteers to solve a local problem regarding community cats utilizing TNR has not been found heretofore in the literature. Furthermore, this paper is expected to contribute to the growing autoethnographic literature by providing a first-hand account of engaging with a community of volunteers, advocates, and residents reached through a TNR program. Finally, Burawoy’s challenge will be shown to have been met.

BACKGROUND

On October 21, 2019, a group of citizens attended their City Council meeting to voice concerns about a local matter of alleged animal cruelty. I was among them. This paper examines my involvement in founding a grass roots organization to address the issues that were raised in this meeting and the subsequent creation of a TNR group in the city, and ultimately, extending throughout the county.

Most of the citizens present at a standing room only City of Ashtabula (Ohio) council meeting on October 21, 2019 were there to voice concern about a news story that was in the local newspaper, the *Star Beacon Journal*. The story involved a cat that was reported found hanging from a tree (Terry 2019a). Although the cat survived, rumors and conjecture quickly made their way through the city; “will there be a ban on feeding stray cats?” was one such question that was frequently asked (Terry 2019b-d, Terry 2019 f-g). As the story was retold, the

number of cats that were reportedly found hanging increased. Ultimately, it was determined that one cat had been found hanging from a tree; this cat was freed unharmed (Terry 2019e).

During the open public comment session, citizens voiced their concerns, and fears, about stray and feral cats in the community. Advocates, including myself, offered the City Council a solution to these concerns: TNR. TNR, an acronym for Trap, Neuter, Return, is a humane and effective solution to a community's "cat problems". Heralded by agencies and non-profit animal advocacy groups such as the Humane Society of the United States, the Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Alley Cats Allies, and Best Friends, successful TNR programs have been instituted in cities across the United States and elsewhere beginning in the 1990s (Best Friends Animal Society 2018). TNR involves the trapping of community cats (aka free roaming cats), neutering the cats at a clinic or veterinary hospital, and then returning the cats to the location where they were initially trapped.

A TNR program can speak to the desires of a variety of groups; animal advocates, conservationists and bird enthusiasts, home owners, and business owners. Whether an animal advocate wants to reduce animal suffering, a conservationist or bird enthusiast wanting to reduce attacks on birds or other wildlife, a home owner or business owner wanting community cats to stop destructive or nuisance behaviors, the end result of colony attrition through TNR addresses all of those needs. What is compelling about a TNR program is that both sides of the proverbial fence, that is, those who "love cats" and those who "hate cats", have their needs met.

After speaking to City Council in the open meeting, my fear was that "nothing would happen" once everyone went home. Yes, animal advocates, representing different animal welfare non-profits in both the city and the county, came out in force, sharing the challenges they currently face. Yes, individuals who have quietly worked in the shadows doing TNR, oftentimes using their own money, came out to express the need for TNR. Yes, residents who feed these community cats came out to challenge any thought that council may have to ban feeding. Even those residents present who did not feed, nor encouraged the feeding of community cats, wanted to see something "done" as they were frustrated with cats destroying their property. Nonetheless, the question remained, "What would come out of this meeting?"

At the beginning of the meeting, the Clerk of Council had provided a "sign in" sheet asking for contact information of those residents who were present, indicating that they may be contacted in the future. Having worked on other animal-related issues with the City Council in the past, I e-mailed the Clerk of Council shortly after the meeting and offered to take the sign-in sheet to organize a group. Because representatives from several animal welfare non-profit groups were in attendance, I wanted to make sure that I did not "step on anyone's toes". Therefore, I waited to see if someone in one of those non-profit groups would step forward. I also waited to see if one of the independent Trappers would step forward. No one did. On October 30, I sent out a mass e-mail to those individuals who had provided their contact information on the sign-in sheet. I asked if those residents wanted to organize and offered to help facilitate the process.

As an Applied Sociologist who teaches courses in *Animals in Society* and in *Community Organizations*, I felt that I was uniquely qualified to spearhead this initiative. What I had conceived and what ultimately was the result, however, would be quite different. Nonetheless,

the results of this initiative were impressive. In the first year, the group that would ultimately become the Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County (CCCAC or “The Coalition”) would neuter 510 community cats.

Organizing a Coalition

Following my initial “do you want to work on this” e-mail, the response I received was swift and positive. As a group, prior to my first report to City Council in December 2019, we met three times: November 11 (sixteen residents present), November 25 (fifteen residents present) and December 9 (fifteen residents present). It was clear that there was a core group of highly committed residents and that a grass-roots organization would be created.

The first item on my agenda was to create an identity for the group. Although several names were suggested over the course of the first three meetings, we settled on the name “Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County” (CCCAC) as it represents the purpose of the group; that is, addressing the “community cats” issue. The initial idea was to create a coalition representing members of existing community groups so that the organizations’ members could collaborate, creating synergy while reducing duplication of efforts. What would eventually result, however, is that I would work very closely with two other volunteers to manage the CCCAC (aka “The Coalition”) and the three of us became the leadership. The evolution of The Coalition will be discussed shortly.

Once an identity was created, our emerging group wrote a vision statement, a mission statement, and identified goals and objectives. The next item that was addressed was the need for fundraising to assist with long term goals. A local non-profit animal welfare organization would become CCCAC’s fiscal manager for fundraising purposes, transparency, and financial accountability in the inaugural year.

Important for this endeavor was cooperation with the City of Ashtabula. The CCCAC wanted to address a social problem identified by the residents of the city in such a way that would be in collaboration with city officials. Enthusiastic and eager to assist, the City’s Animal Control Officer was grateful for the effort and began to enumerate the scope of the “cat problem” by identifying “hot spots” where a high number of community cats could be found based largely on residents’ complaints. Likewise, the City Council was highly supportive of this initiative and welcomed the effort (Terry 2020e).

The CCCAC would meet bi-weekly over the winter months (December 2019 - March 2020). Initially, the use of PetFix Northeast Ohio[®] was discussed and options examined, including bringing a mobile spay/neuter van to Ashtabula County or, alternatively, transporting cats to a PetFix clinic in Cuyahoga County. The need to tap into other needed resources was also discussed, including identifying civic-minded groups as a resource to recruit volunteers and obtain financial assistance, a new, local veterinary technician program and an existing veterinarian assistance program to recruit volunteers and create internship opportunities, and local businesses who could be tapped for fundraising opportunities. To assist with information sharing and transparency, I created two Facebook pages for the CCCAC; one as a “closed” Facebook group CCCAC Volunteer page and the second as an “open” public Facebook page. By mid-February, a goal to trap and neuter 40 cats for a March 4th surgery date was scheduled. This goal reflected the original intent to have one large-scale TNR every month.

The Evolution of the Coalition

My initial plan was to create a “turn key operation”; that is, to get the proverbial “ball rolling” to establish firstly, a robust TNR program, and secondly, to bring a spay/neuter clinic to the county of Ashtabula. My idea behind this initiative was to create a coalition or alliance and help organize animal advocates, concerned citizens, public officials, community leaders including small business owners, club organizers, and clergy, and anyone else who wanted to get involved.

I had been awarded a Sabbatical leave for the 2021 Spring semester. My proposed Sabbatical had me volunteering for an international non-profit organization engaged in community development activities, and specifically, working with animals. Those plans were sidelined due to COVID-19. What did this all mean for the Cats Coalition that I had founded? It would ultimately mean that I would transition from being a “moderator” at meetings to becoming “hands on”. Our first TNR event was held the day after I left for a deployment with the Humane Society of the United States’ Animal Rescue Team. The Coalition volunteers that I had helped organize were able to trap, neuter, and return our goal of 40 cats. When I had returned to Ohio two weeks later, I returned to a state that was on “shut down” and would not allow any veterinarian care (outside of emergencies) due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place. All of our planned TNR events were cancelled due to spay/neuter clinics not being able to do surgeries, as neuter surgery is seen as an “elective surgery”. The Coalition’s TNR plans were effectively shut down for nearly two months.

My biggest fear at this time was losing the momentum that the Coalition had following a very successful, initial TNR event. Other concerns that I had were related to the economic uncertainty due to lost wages, the inability to gather as a TNR group, the inability to go into the community and meet with colony caretakers, the mental health toll on volunteers, and other COVID-related concerns and that these issues would render the TNR initiative ineffective. These fears would largely not materialize. While the ability and desire of some volunteers did wane after the initial excitement, a core group of dedicated volunteers emerged. The TNR group was able to meet virtually on Zoom® for planning purposes, were able to trap cats with social distancing in place, were able to communicate with colony caretakers largely through phone conversations, and the ability to engage in meaningful volunteerism was reportedly beneficial for many volunteers (personal communications, 2020).

CCCAC’s TNR RESULTS

As has been said, “numbers don’t lie.” The average cost of a neuter surgery for a cat varies and according to a Google search, the estimates range anywhere from \$100 to \$400 in a private veterinarian practice. Nonetheless, one source states that a neuter of a male cat (castration) is \$95 and the de-sexing of a female cat (spay) is \$140 at a private office (Thecatsite.com). A cat that is taken to a low cost spay/neuter clinic (which is based on a person’s income) averages \$40 for a male cat and \$60 for a female cat (Thecatsite.com). My experience in Ohio is that this is an accurate estimate. A community cat that is TNR’d (which includes an “ear tip” and rabies vaccination) may cost between \$30 and \$60; if there is a subsidized program in place, the cost to an individual trapper may range between \$0 and \$25. In comparison, the cost of euthanizing a cat averages \$100. (Thecatsite.com).

In the first year of the CCCAC, a total of 510 cats were neutered (Fiala 2021, Terry 2020a, Terry 2020d). The CCCAC raised \$17,596.75 in donations and spent \$17,443.25 in neuter surgery and additional veterinary care (e.g. Convenia injection) (Fiala 2021). The Coalition spent an average cost of \$33.80 for a community cat. Because 57% of the cats that were neutered were female (289 female cats) and one female cat averages 12 kittens in one year (International Cat Care 2021), a minimum of 3468 kitten births were prevented. A paper on the characteristics of the cats that were TNR'd by The Coalition, and the hypothesized impact of the TNR program, is forthcoming.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Doing” Sociology

As will be described, my involvement in the Coalition represented a “roll up the sleeves and let’s get to work” approach to a community’s concern. I had anticipated drawing upon my organizational skills and understanding of group dynamics. The insights that I gained as a result of participating in TNR represent outcomes independent of the number of cats that were neutered and the number of kitten births prevented. Indeed, I will explore these insights as part of the “Lessons Learned”.

Understanding the TNR Subculture

On reflection, I have been excited to learn about, and interact with, an entire subculture of which I was previously unaware. Although I had been engaged in animal advocacy work for decades, the last 20 years involved the rescue and transport of (mostly) dogs. Having engaged in “Freedom Runs” or “Freedom Rides” for dogs (and occasionally cats), my main contact with the rescue community was limited to “dog people” (Fiala 2012). I had no prior experience with “cat people” let alone community cats.

While I was aware of TNR, I had never trapped a cat nor previously interacted with cat colony caretakers. Just as I had learned about a subculture of rescue transport (i.e. Freedom Runs), I would soon learn about another subculture. This TNR subculture to which I became exposed includes such statuses and accompanying roles as “trappers”, “feeders”, and cat colony caretakers. Additionally, I have been exposed to a new language which includes terms such as traps, “forks” (i.e. trap dividers), and trap covers. I would learn about the different types of traps that a trapper may use, how to set a trap, how to fold newspapers in such a way as to line a trap, how to feed a cat in a trap, how to change soiled newspapers in a trap, how to transport a trapped cat, and how to release a cat following surgery.

In my exposure to this TNR subculture, I learned many of the community’s beliefs, values, and norms, in addition to the material objects, artifacts, and language that make up the community. I would eventually be able to recite the position statements of advocacy groups as to the benefits of TNR and justify the practice of returning a neutered cat back to the outdoors. I learned ways in which to keep the group’s focus on TNR and largely resist the urge to re-home friendly stray cats who were in relatively safe environments. I learned about barn cat placement programs, how to set up a barn for acclimatizing a cat to a new environment, and what a barn owner could provide for a feral or semi-feral cat. Additionally, I learned about the

resources of other community agencies that we could call upon to assist with kittens, sick cats, and colony caretakers who needed assistance to provide for their colonies.

While my academic brain was telling me that The Coalition was solving a community's problem using the most humane and effective method available, my emotional heart felt a combination of positive and negative states: guilt, betrayal, frustration, compassion, gratitude, and humbleness among other feelings. I had not expected the range nor intensity of emotions that I would experience. On one occasion, I had trapped a feral cat on my property that was coming from a neighbor's yard. My neighbor is a feeder and it is not uncommon to see 15 or 20 cats roaming about. Upon trapping the cat, I quickly felt that I had betrayed him. I knew he was coming to my home to get another meal and to sleep in a shelter I had left out in the bushes. After releasing the cat back on my property, I never saw the cat again. I understood then why some feeders and caretakers did not want to trap and neuter the cats that rely on them.

I have also been frustrated when I get scratched taking care of feral cats in traps as from my perspective, I am providing them with a better life. One time, I even yelled at one very angry cat who took a gouge out of my gloved hand, stating "I should throw you into traffic." Immediately, I felt guilty and ashamed. Guilt is another emotion that I have struggled with. I have felt incredible guilt returning friendly stray cats "back to the streets", even if there is someone to feed them. It is not uncommon to trap a stray cat who was obviously a pet at one time. The guilt stems from the fact that the cat had lived indoors with a family as evidenced by the fact that it likes to be petted, and indeed, sometimes even to be held. Placing a purring, friendly cat back into the community may seem cruel, however, the cat could be an "indoor-outdoor" intact, or not neutered, cat with an owner. It is the "R" part of TNR that seems to be the hardest. Heart-strings are also pulled when sick or injured cats are trapped (they will receive veterinarian care through TNR) and knowing that the care that we had provided may be quickly undone when the cat returns to the streets. Of course, addressing the unique needs of kittens and of elderly cats, likewise, has placed a heavy emotional toll on me. Still, nothing is better than knowing that "because of this short-term relationship, no matter what ultimately happens, the cat is better off" for having been the recipient of a TNR.

However, one of the most important lessons I learned is that there needs to be a coordinated response to address the unique requirements of kittens, elderly cats, and sick or injured cats, in addition to the stray and feral cats that are part of a TNR program. Ideally, this coordinated response would incorporate networking strategies, communication skills, training in the handling of cats, and information on compassion fatigue.

The Need for Cat Colony Caretakers, Feeders, and Community Involvement

When I first became involved in a TNR program, I had very little knowledge about a "cat colony caretaker". While I knew that there were people who fed stray cats, I did not previously consider the extent of care that may be provided these cats. In my interaction with colony caretakers, I would meet men and women who built not only shelters for cats but had regular feeding schedules for these cats, who would spay or neuter a cat as they were able, and who would take cats with kittens to the local animal shelter.

It was not long before I realized that there were two distinct types of "stray cat feeders": the "feeder" and the "colony caretaker". The feeders are those people in the

community who feel a responsibility to provide for the stray cats that they are seeing in their neighborhood. The feeders generally do not know how many cats they are feeding, largely do not know the characteristics of the cats that they are feeding (e.g. color, approximate age), do not interact with the cats, nor feel any particular attachment to the cats. While talking with feeders, I learned that most feel a moral obligation to provide food, and some provided shelter, but that is the extent of their connection to the cats. Many feeders indicated that if the cats could be re-homed, they would be happy to see them “leave” even though they would “probably miss them” (personal communications, 2020).

In contrast, the colony caretakers are both a part of a subculture and independent of this subculture. On the one hand, colony caretakers share similar values about community cats and engage in similar behaviors. The majority of colony caretakers that the CCCAC worked with knew each cat that they fed (e.g. approximate age of cat) including individual cat’s personalities. Many caretakers had even given names to “their” cats. That is, they considered themselves informal owners of the cats for which they cared. They enjoy having the cats around and even insisted upon the cats return following their neuter surgery. Many were fearful that the cats would either not be returned or that something “bad” would happen to them and stated that they would “absolutely miss the cats” even if it were for a night or two pre and post-surgery (personal communications, 2020). I admired the care and concern that colony caretakers expressed for “their” cats.

On the other hand, my experience was also that colony caretakers do not interact with one another. That is, they are not in communication with each other, they do not meet one another, nor do they know where to find other colony caretakers. In many respects, they are like islands in an archipelago. Most of the caretakers that the CCCAC worked with were also unaware of neighboring county TNR programs, most did not know where they could find low cost spay/neuter clinics for the cats they were feeding, many did not know how to create *suitable* shelters for community cats, and many were not feeding the cats nutritious meals (e.g. feeding snack foods, giving cats milk instead of water, overfeeding, etc.).

What struck me the most about working with colony caretakers and feeders was their level of dedication. Whether stemming from a sense of moral obligation or from true affection of the stray cats, the people I came into contact with would spend their own money to care for these vulnerable cats. In fact, many colony caretakers and a number of feeders gave donations ranging from \$20 to \$200 to the CCCAC. For many, this was a true sacrifice of resources. I was humbled.

The characteristics of the colony caretakers that the CCCAC made trapping arrangements with appear to reflect what has been observed in other studies. (e.g. Centonze and Levy 2002). Centonze and Levy (2002) found that females were more likely than males to be colony caretakers (84% female). Individuals who requested assistance from the CCCAC were overwhelmingly female. Likewise, in scheduling the trapping of stray and feral cats, the CCCAC worked primarily with female feeders as well as female colony caretakers. I will note that this represents my general impressions and additional research would need to be done.

Furthermore, it is important to note that not all those who requested assistance were feeders or colony caretakers; in fact, some of the requests for assistance were received as a result of neighbor disputes forwarded to the CCCAC by the city and/or county Animal Control

Officers. Having been both a feeder of cats that would come to my yard from a neighbor, and having been a trapper of cats, I am finding myself in a position where I can use my sociological training to better understand the statuses I am occupying and the roles I am playing. I would come to learn that the emotional attachment (or detachment) combined with the technical aspects of care taking has been described by Finkler and Terkel (2015). I hope to add to this literature in future work to further understanding the dichotomy in the emotional approaches described by Finkler and Terkel (2015).

An important lesson that was learned with working with residents in the community was the significant role that these residents play in the success of a TNR program. Moreover, understanding the motivation(s) for feeding and caring for cats, as well as the reasons for resisting TNR assistance, would be instructive to overcoming barriers of TNR programs and encouraging participation in future endeavors. A follow-up examination on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of cat colony care providers and feeders is warranted.

Work of Volunteers as Essential to the Coalition

It is not an overstatement to say that without volunteers, and two volunteers in particular, that this initiative would not have been possible. One volunteer took on the role of Trapping Coordinator. The lion's share of the organizing work was completed by her and the success of The Coalition would not have been possible without this important work. This volunteer secured the location for pre and post-surgical cat care, communicated with residents who requested services, arranged the trapping schedule, provided daily cat care, coordinated volunteers, and assisted with strategic planning. A second volunteer not only often worked independently trapping in rural areas of the county, but also assisted with coordinating trapping, transporting cats to neuter surgery, record keeping, communicating with individuals and administrators of barn placement programs, and strategic planning. My own role in the Coalition, outside of founding the group, was largely that of trapping cats, providing daily cat care, transporting cats, public relations and working with the local media, communicating with City Council, and analyzing the information collected regarding the TNR program. In addition to our individual contributions, we worked together to organize fundraising and maintained the financial records. The three of us represent the leadership of the CCCAC.

Although the group started off with 15 or so volunteers who attended the early meetings, as with any group, there would be a shake out. At the end of the first trapping season, in addition to the leadership, there were 4 or 5 volunteers who assisted somewhat regularly with trapping, cat care, and/or transport. Other volunteers helped on the day of a fundraiser held in July 2020. Volunteers also folded newspapers, washed trap covers, blankets and towels, and helped place Styrofoam cat shelters in the community.

Ironically, volunteers were not only those individuals who are affiliated with the CCCAC. While trapping, people in the community would also assist us. CCCAC trappers are instructed to not leave a trap unattended. When trapping, several locations are identified for trapping cats for a single surgical date. This is done as a way to ensure that enough cats are trapped to fill the surgical slots that are allocated to The Coalition. However, with 3 or 4 trappers trapping cats (often working in pairs) and with the demand for assistance far outweighing the capacity to provide it, trap "watchers" become vital to the success of a trapping day. Due to having

multiple trapping locations, trappers would often ask a colony caretaker, feeder, or someone else present at the location to “watch the traps” and notify the trapper if a cat had been trapped. These “trap watchers” allow the CCCAC to maximize efficiency and ensure that an animal is not left in an unattended trap.

Here, too, I was impressed with the care, concern, and dedication of volunteers and residents who were freely giving of their time and money to help with a program that they believed was important. A valuable lesson learned here was the importance of volunteers to a successful outcome, the need to provide volunteers with rewarding activities, understanding why volunteers may discontinue their involvement, and the desire on the part of volunteers to be seen by others as integral to the program.

Relationships with Animal Welfare Community Organizations

The 501(c)3 group that had initially offered to affiliate with the CCCAC for fundraising and financial record keeping purposes did not come to fruition. However, another nonprofit quickly stepped forward and took on the role of “fiscal sponsor” for the first year. Had it not been for collaborating with this agency, The Coalition may not have been able to provide TNR for as many cats as we did. In fact, it was through a grant written by this nonprofit that the CCCAC was able to procure 22 traps to use for trapping cats. The CCCAC will have these traps as long as the TNR group is active; at such time the group no longer is functioning, the traps will become property of the nonprofit. I will note that through borrowing traps from other agencies and individual trappers having their own traps, The Coalition generally has 48 – 50 traps available. The questions for the 2021 TNR season will include whether or not the CCCAC will continue this relationship, seek to work with another nonprofit that currently engages in TNR, or pursue non-profit status as an independent organization.

Representatives from local animal-welfare agencies in the county had attended the initial, organizing meetings. Although the coalition, as originally conceived, did not materialize, several members who represent the resulting Coalition do work or volunteer with these other agencies. Primarily through information-sharing with these local non-profits, the CCCAC was able to address issues that arose.

For example, the intent of a TNR program is to Trap-Neuter-Return community cats; however, the CCCAC has often been asked to assist with cats who have recently given birth. TNR programs, in general, and the CCCAC’s program, specifically, are not set up to address found kittens. A common heuristic that is applied to answering the question of “when can a kitten be neutered” is that the kitten should have attained the age of 8 weeks and weigh 2 pounds, although there is no current research to suggest that healthy kittens neutered at 1.5 pounds or at 6 weeks of age are at higher risk for anesthetic or surgical complications (University of Wisconsin, School of Veterinary Medicine 2018). Nonetheless, TNR programs are not equipped to provide for kittens until they reach the weight and age for neuter surgery. One ethical question then becomes “what to do with weaned kittens” that would not likely survive on their own while the “mom” cat is trapped and neutered and returned days later. A second ethical question regards what to do with kittens who have not weaned. A third ethical dilemma is “what to do with a kitten that is a good candidate for adoption”. Without access to fosters

who can provide for kittens, or kitten rescue groups to assume responsibility for them, a group such as the CCCAC finds itself addressing these ethical dilemmas.

In addition to information sharing, there has also been resource sharing among the different agencies. As noted, the CCCAC has borrowed traps to trap stray and feral cats. The CCCAC has also relied on several animal welfare agencies for assistance with testing and vaccinations for kittens who will ultimately be placed for adoption. Kittens who can be adopted and thus removed from the dangerous environment of living in the community, should be tested for contagious diseases and, ideally, vaccinated against feline herpesvirus type 1, feline calicivirus, feline panleukopenia virus, rabies (if old enough), and feline leukemia virus (American Animal Hospital Association 2020). This is often provided as a feline combination vaccine known as FVRCP (feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus, and panleukopenia). Without access to trained individuals as well as a supply of these vaccinations, any kittens that are found as part of a TNR event should not be adopted. Having a rescue group who can assume responsibility for the kittens at the time of trapping is ideal.

One important lesson learned in working with animal welfare community organizations is that “many hands make for light work.” When cooperation and coordination was possible, resources were better controlled and the CCCAC was more effective (e.g. borrowing traps, obtaining vaccinations). When organizations were unable to provide for the CCCAC’s needs (e.g. lack of fosters for kittens), the leadership and volunteers of the CCCAC experienced high levels of stress, frustration, and the sense of failure (personal communication).

Relationships with Non-Animal Welfare Community Organizations

Perhaps my last “lesson learned” is that I learned about different community groups and organizations that are not a part of the animal rescue community. The CCCAC would collaborate with a Pet Food Pantry in neighboring Lake County and later meet with the local Rotary Club, with the Farm Bureau, with the local Lions Club, and other civic groups, clubs, and organizations that could provide financial assistance or be a source of volunteers. One volunteer with The Coalition is currently an elected official and business owner whose network is expansive and he has provided necessary introductions to many of these groups and organizations. Although I moved to this community 20 years ago, the fact of the matter is that my university position is in a neighboring state. I came to recognize that my knowledge of the different organizations in this community was ashamedly low. Delightfully so, I also learned that there are many people in this community who are willing and quite eager to help the CCCAC.

Indeed, while the need for TNR and low cost spay/neuter is high in the city, and county, of Ashtabula, I would quickly learn that there are a lot of people who are doing the best they can to provide for the community cats. I also learned that there are a lot of groups and organizations willing to help with this initiative. Whether through providing financial assistance, giving donations of cat food or towels and sheets for traps, providing a place to keep and recover TNR’d cats, or serving as volunteers, the willingness of people in the community to assist the CCCAC was truly humbling.

What I learned by working with agencies that are not a part of the animal welfare community was the existence of a network of people who also shared many of the concerns of

the animal welfare community. Although animal welfare issues may not be their organization's focus, the desire to assist with the TNR program was quite evident. Simply because an organization may have other charitable interests does not mean that they do not share the interest to provide for community cats.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A descriptive autoethnography has the potential to be tiresome or boring to read (Chang 2016, Van Maanen 1998). Generically, the autoethnography approach has also been criticized for being "self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized." (Wall 2016:1). Nonetheless, without a description of the processes involved, another risk is that the work could become a litany of subjective observations that are not grounded in objective understanding. A coalition does not simply form because a group wills it but rather because a plan is set into action.

Limitations of the work described in this paper are those that normally are associated with an autoethnography and have been described elsewhere (e.g. Marzia 2003, Plummer 2001). An autoethnography has been defined as "...an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:739). As such, this method allows me to consider my experiences interpreted through a sociological lens.

However, in my attempt to provide an accounting of my experiences in a narrative form, I cannot discuss my role in a vacuum, although to a degree, I must. Other individuals have contributed to the success of The Coalition yet ethical considerations prevent me from disclosing not only their identifying information but also leaves out the experiences they have had. Moreover, although I am able to share personal communications that I have had with other volunteers, this telling of those experiences would be one-sided as it represents my interpretation of events. That is, it is subjective by its very nature.

As a result of the "lessons learned", it is my intent to examine the topic of colony caretakers specifically, and TNR, more generically, in the future. One of the early goals of the Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County is to bring a spay/neuter clinic to the county. It is my desire to demonstrate how the presence of colony caretakers can inform this debate. That is, the presence of a subculture of individuals who are dedicated to providing care for stray and feral cats may "tip the balance" by ensuring that the colonies would be maintained once stabilized. Indeed, current work in TNR is now incorporating another aspect to TNR; namely, TNRM with the "M" standing for "monitor" (ASPCA 2021) or "management" (The Community Cats Podcast 2017). In TNRM, a colony caretaker not only provides the community cats with food, water, and shelter, but monitors or manages the colony for the cats' health post release and notifies a TNR program when veterinarian care is needed.

Moreover, it is also my desire to share with decision makers the challenges that those engaged in TNR work currently experience. While decision makers may be aware of individual trappers who engage in TNR activities as they are able, I would suggest that adding their voice to that of colony caretakers and feeders who need assistance would demonstrate the need for a brick-and-mortar county spay/neuter clinic.

Additionally, it is my intent to more fully and robustly examine each of the “lessons learned” in future work. That is, my intent is to engage in both descriptive and reflective work regarding volunteering with colony caretakers and feeders, individuals engaged in TNR, volunteers, community organizations, the public’s perception about TNR programs, and lastly, my own changes in attitude and behavior.

Lastly, the CCCAC has the potential to evolve into a formal, normative organization (Etzioni 1975) should the TNR work continue. Nonetheless, at present, there are too many unknown variables, including, but not limited to, access to volunteers, money, and trapped cat recovery location, to hypothesize its future.

CONCLUSION

As an Applied Sociologist and Animal Advocate, my original plan was to kickstart a vibrant TNR program in a city where residents had identified “too many cats” as a problem that needed to be humanely addressed. Residents demanded that the City Council address the need for reducing the stray cat population. Ashtabula County does not have a spay/neuter clinic and residents must rely on private veterinarians to have their animals neutered or reach out to a mobile spay/neuter clinic or service. A third alternative is to take a stray cat(s) to one of the neighboring counties that does have a TNR clinic. From the city’s center, the nearest county’s clinic is an hour’s drive. To assist in this need, a local non-profit has coordinated transportation for residents’ cats (and dogs) to a spay/neuter clinic in Cuyahoga County (two counties to the south of Ashtabula County).

Creating a Community Cats Coalition may be the first step to a formal, subsidized, county-wide TNR program. It is the intent of the CCCAC to institutionalize TNR as a program and have it funded, even if only in part, by the county. The ultimate goal of the CCCAC is to build a low cost spay/neuter clinic in the County or to collaborate on low cost spay/neuter and TNR services through the local animal shelter. A low cost spay/neuter clinic would provide an unserved, or under-served, community the ability to reduce the stray and feral cat population, reduce suffering of community cats, and reduce neighbor to neighbor conflict.

This work may serve as a teaching tool or case study for those who want to engage in public or professional sociology. In this paper, I described how a community problem was identified by its residents, how concerned citizens and animal advocates were organized to form a coalition, the steps taken in coalition building, strategic planning, and information dissemination, the coordination with the city government, the organization of volunteers including identifying important statuses and roles, and how the coalition identified and worked with distinct subcultures within the community.

Additionally, this paper may serve as a catalyst for further exploration in grass root organization and community problem solving regarding community cats. Prior programs to address feral and stray cats utilized a “trap and kill” approach where cats were trapped and then euthanized. These programs were generally instituted by a local government agency. Increasingly, this approach is rejected by members in the community as perceptions about community cats have changed (Van Patter et al. 2016, Lord 2008). As animal welfare agencies or humane societies replaced the earlier trap-and-euthanize with TNR, it is noted that the programs to address community cats are now almost always run by non-profit organizations.

Other approaches have resulted in a coalition approach such as was originally intended, but unrealized, for the CCCAC (University of Guelph 2015, Toronto Feral Cat TNR Coalition N.d.). In contrast, the Community Cats Coalition of Ashtabula County represents an all-volunteer, donation-funded, grass roots initiative that came about because citizens joined forces to address a shared concern. While a non-profit did act as a fiscal manager for fundraising activities (to allow for transparency and give legitimacy to the CCCAC) the CCCAC itself does not have a formal structure. Should the CCCAC continue to engage in TNR activities following its first year, it can be anticipated that this informal structure will eventually result in a formal, normative organization (e.g. Weber 1921/1978, Etzioni 1975).

Ironically, my original intent for my Sabbatical was to engage in community development and veterinarian assistance on an international stage. The irony is that I would engage in community development and animal advocacy in my own community.

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California Press. Originally published as Max Weber. 1922. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*. Mohr: Tübingen.`

COMMONLY ACCEPTED TERMS

Colony Caretaker - an individual (or group of individuals) who manages one or more cat colonies in a community; providing food, water and shelter. (ASPCA)

Community Cats - a term used to describe outdoor, unowned, free-roaming cats. These cats could be friendly, feral, adults, kittens, healthy, sick, altered and/or unaltered. By this definition, the only outdoor free-roaming cats who are not community cats are those who have an owner. (ASPCA)

Feral Cat - a cat who has either never had any contact with humans or contact with humans has diminished over time. The cat is fearful of people and survives on their own outdoors. A feral cat is not likely to ever become a lap cat or enjoy living indoors. (Alley Cat Allies)

Indoor/Outdoor Cat – a cat that lives and spends time both indoors (inside a home) and outdoors. (AAFP)

Neuter - castration in the male (removal of the testes), and spay of the female (removal of the ovaries and uterus). (International Cat Care). *Note, the phrase “spay/neuter” is a redundancy in that *neuter* (de-sexing) applies to both castration and spay.

PetFix Northeast Ohio® - a non-profit organization that offers high quality, affordable spay and neuter surgeries. (PetFix Northeast Ohio)

RTF – acronym for Return To Field. RTF programs are similar to a community TNR program except for the fact that the cat has entered an animal shelter at one point in the process. (ASPCA)

SNR – acronym for Shelter, Neuter, Return. (Windsor Essex County Humane Society)

Stray Cat – a *cat* who has been socialized to people at some point in its life, but has left or lost its domestic home, as well as most human contact and dependence. (Alley Cat Allies)

TNR – acronym for Trap, Neuter, Return. (ASPCA)

TNVR – acronym for Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate, Return. *Note: Most TNR programs do provide rabies vaccination. (ASPCA)

TNRM – acronym for Trap, Neuter, Return, Monitor. Increasingly, colony caretakers are encouraged to monitor the health of a colony. (ASPCA)

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