The Relationship between Animal Abuse and Family Violence

Implications for Animal Welfare Agencies and Human Service Organisations

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Background

Each year, thousands of children (Black et al 2001) and millions of women are physically abused (Schumacher et al 2001). Although the majority of research into child physical abuse remains separate from that examining partner abuse (Heyman and Smith Slep 2001), available information regarding the comorbidity of the two forms of abuse highlights the significant overlap. For example, in a national survey of over 6,000 US families, 50 per cent of men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children (Straus and Gelles 1990).

In a detailed review of the child physical abuse literature, Black and colleagues (2001) reported that both intergenerational transmission of abuse and history of poor familial support were moderately associated with child physical abuse. High levels of family stress, low cohesion and partner aggression were also reported to be significant risk factors for child physical abuse. Providing further evidence of the comorbidity between different types of family violence, studies have shown that the risk of severe child physical abuse is higher in families where there is husband to wife or wife to husband verbal or physical aggression (e.g. Straus 1994, Straus and Smith 1990, Ross, 1996).

Focused on the male to female physical abuse literature, Schumacher et al (2001) reported that demographic variables such as socio-economic status, perpetrator age, and education level appear to be only weakly correlated with partner physical abuse. In contrast, all forms of family-of-origin violence factors were reported to be moderately to strongly correlated with partner physical abuse. These include history of child sexual victimization, exposure to parental physical and/or verbal aggression, violent adult models in childhood, and aggression by the parent outside of the family. Other important predictive factors include perpetrator characteristics of elevated levels of aggression, anger, hostility, and impulsivity (e.g. Hamberger and Hastings 1991, Hastings and Hamberger 1994, Murphy et al 1993).

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Animal Abuse and Family Violence

Several of the reported risk factors for child and partner physical abuse overlap with those for juvenile or adult criminality. Among many identified risk factors are those within the family. For example, poor family management practices, and severe, harsh or inconsistent punishment have been documented to be predictors of delinquent behaviour (e.g. Peterson et al 1994). Further reinforcing the overlap between family violence and anti-social behaviour patterns, family abuse and violence have been found to be significant predictors of criminality (Pelcovitz et al 2000).

Of particular relevance, Pelcovitz et al. (2000) have reported that adolescents who are both witness to and victim of abuse have significantly more externalising behaviour problems than non-abused witnesses. Straus et al (1980) reported that boys who witness paternal violence are at a 1,000 per cent increased risk for assaulting their own partners as adults. Therefore, it is clear that for many children at risk of developing conduct problems in childhood and subsequent anti-social problems in adulthood, among the institutions that have failed them are the family (e.g. Baldry and Farrington 2000, Bank and Burraston 2001, McCloskey et al 1995, Sternberg et al 1993).

In the most severe of situations, specifically domestic violence and child abuse, the behavioural problems of youth have been documented to be of an intergenerational nature (Black et al, 2001).

Links between Violence towards Humans and Animals

Substantial research evidence thus exists to support a link between experiences of and/or witnessing of violence in childhood and perpetrating violence in adulthood. This literature, with a focus on violence perpetrated against humans, is expansive.

Comparatively less well documented, but by no means less compelling, are the reported associations between violence towards humans and violence towards animals.

Case study accounts of the relationship, such as the one that follows, are powerful indicators of an association that has remained largely unexplored and/or undocumented by both researchers and practitioners.

> *Mary, J. shot her husband as he entered their trailer, in fact blew the top of his head off. Why? Not because he hit her. He did. Not because he was mean to the children. He was. Not because he had isolated her from her family and friends in a small trailer miles from anything. He had. No, she killed him because he told her he was going to bring home another puppy for her to hold down while he had intercourse with the animal* (Quinlisk 1999: 171).

Although existent data do not provide evidence that animal abuse *leads to or causes* interpersonal violence, there is sufficient evidence that the two types of violence are strongly associated. That the presence of one type of violence may predict the increased likelihood of another type is supported by Pelcovitz et al (2000). They have noted that as the frequency of marital violence in the family increases, the likelihood that child abuse will also be present increases dramatically. Therefore, it seems reasonable to propose that the presence of animal abuse and determination of its severity may play a role in predicting the severity of partner physical abuse and/or the occurrence of child abuse.

Theoretical Explanations

Several theoretical approaches have been put forth to explain partner and child physical abuse. Once considered to be an outcome of a parent's emotional illness, child physical abuse is now more likely to be explained within an ecological framework such that the causal factors are multiple, including parental, family, and societal characteristics as well as the interactions among them (Belsky 1980).

As with the child abuse literature, ecological models such as that by Dutton (1995) have been proposed to explain partner physical abuse. According to this model, factors operate at various system levels including the level of individual characteristics, the family, the community, and the society. The more proximal levels of the family and individual include factors such as marital conflict, past family experiences, emotional reactivity, and personality traits. Other theoretical approaches focus only on specific levels. For example, according to social learning theorists, many behaviours are learned through either observation or direct experience or both (O'Leary 1988). Personality theories consider factors characterising individuals to be most useful in understanding partner abuse.

Not surprisingly, given the overall lack of attention given to the importance of human-animal interactions for understanding human behaviour and well-being (Fawcett and Gullone 2001, Serpell 1999), theoretical understanding of animal abuse and its relationship with human abuse is comparatively less well developed than that dealing specifically with human abuse. However despite this limited attention, some progress has been made in identifying likely factors that explain animal abuse.

Proposed Explanatory Factors for the Abuse of Animals

Anecdotal and empirical reports show that animals are killed or harmed in an effort to intimidate, frighten or control others (Arkow 1996, Ascione and Arkow 1999, Boat 1995). Men who resort to violence to control women can enhance their control by harming or killing family animals, or by threatening to do so (Boat 1999). As reported by battered women, in an effort to assert their control or continue their campaign of terror, perpetrators have stabbed, shot, hanged, and otherwise mutilated the family pets. In some cases, the animals disappear or die mysteriously.

Robin and ten Bensel (1985) have argued that for some abused or disturbed children, pets may represent someone that they can gain power and control over. Thus, in such instances, cruelty to animals can be conceptualised as a displacement of aggression from humans to animals. That is, when a child is victimized, powerless, and frightened, they may seek to overcome these feelings by exercising control over someone less powerful than them. This can be a pet, a younger sibling or even peer. Exerting such control may help to restore their sense of self-efficacy.

In their survey of 238 abused adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years and living in juvenile institutions, and 269 control group youth living in the community, Robin and ten Bensel (1985) found that the pets of the institutionalised group of adolescents suffered more abuse, and these adolescents also experienced more violent pet loss than those of the comparison group. The abuser was usually someone other than the child. For example, there were several instances of pets being hurt or killed as punishment to the child. Others (e.g. Muraski 1992 cited in Arkow 1996, Summit 1983) have reported that threatening to harm/kill, or actually

harming/killing, a child's pet is a common technique of child abusers to obtain the child's acquiescence or to keep the child quiet about the abuse.

As argued by Ascione (1999), abusing animals may represent the perpetrator's reduced capacity to empathise with a potential victim (human or animal) (Ascione 1999). Such a claim is supported by the relationship between high callousness and low empathy, with both revealing low levels of concern for others (Lahey et al 1999).

Childhood Animal Cruelty and Violence Towards Humans in Adulthood

Several research studies have investigated the proposal that animal cruelty in childhood is predictive of violence towards humans in adulthood. These studies (e.g. Fethous and Kellert 1986, 1987, Felthous and Yudowitz 1977, Kellert and Felthous 1985, Ressler et al 1988) have typically involved examination of the childhood histories of adult criminals and psychiatric patients.

Their findings indicate that violence in adulthood is significantly associated with retrospective reports of severe animal torture and killing in childhood and adolescence. In Kellert and Felthous' (1985) study, the family backgrounds of the aggressive criminals were reported as being especially violent. Three quarters of the aggressive criminals reported excessive and repeated abuse as children, compared to 31 per cent for non-aggressive criminals and 10 per cent among non-criminals. Seventy-five per cent of non-criminals in Kellert and Felthous' study who experienced parental abuse also reported incidents of animal cruelty.

Based on research such as this, some (e.g. Humane Society for Animal Welfare, USA 1997) have proposed that animal abuse may be a form of rehearsal for human-directed violence; hence they refer to it as the 'First Strike'. This has also been referred to as the 'violence graduation hypothesis', whereby animal abuse is considered to be a developmental, incremental step towards violence directed at humans. In claiming support for such a proposal, animal welfare societies in particular have drawn upon cases of highly publicised serial killers who were abusive towards animals in their childhood.

However, there are problems with such research. For example, there is also evidence that many serial killers did not abuse animals in childhood. Australian Martin Bryant, who shot 35 people in April 1996, was known as an 'animal lover'. He had 30 to 40 dogs and cats in his home. Also, self-reports obtained from criminals convicted for violent and aggressive acts might be exaggerated or even fabricated. Thus, the relationship between aggressive activities and abuse towards animals may be artificially inflated because of selective disclosure. In contrast, community groups or non-aggressive samples may exaggerate their non-deviance (i.e. social desirability bias). Consequently, differences in self-reported rates of animal abuse between community participants and prison inmates might be inflated by response biases in opposing directions.

Concurrent Co-occurrence of Animal Abuse and Human-directed Violence

A second hypothesis conceptualising animal abuse has been referred to as the 'deviance generalisation hypothesis'. According to this hypothesis, animal abuse is one of many forms of anti-social behaviour. Such an approach argues that different criminal behaviours are related with one another – either because one form of deviant behaviour leads to involvement in another, or because different forms of deviance have the same underlying causes (Arluke et al 1999, Ascione 1999).

One of the first empirical studies conducted to investigate the co-occurrence of animal abuse and human-directed violence was that by Tapia (1971). Tapia provided detailed case studies of children aged between 5 and 15 years who had been referred to a psychiatric clinic for their anti-social behaviour. These case studies highlighted that for 18 boys who were identified with histories of cruelty to animals, parental abuse was the most common aetiological factor. At 2 to 9 year follow-up, Tapia found that the children continued to be abusive towards animals (Rigdon and Tapia 1977).

Several other studies have also reported substantial corresponding proportions of animal abuse and human-directed violence. In a sample of families meeting legal criteria for child abuse and neglect, DeViney et al (1983) found that 60 per cent also abused or neglected animals. Of the 57 families identified only for child physical abuse, 88 per cent were also found to be abusing their animals. In two-thirds of cases, the abuser was the father and, demonstrating the inter-generational transmission of abuse, in an alarming 26 per cent of cases, children were the perpetrators of animal abuse. However, the children were the sole abusers in only 14 per cent of cases.

Consistent with DeViney et al's findings, Arkow (1996) reported the findings of an unpublished study (i.e. Hutton 1983 cited in Arkow 1996). This study involved reports regarding 23 families investigated by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for animal abuse or neglect. Of the 23 families, 82 per cent were also known to human service agencies as having children identified as being 'at risk'.

There have also been several studies conducted to examine the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. One of the earliest was a study conducted by Arkow (1994) in which 24 per cent of 122 women seeking refuge from domestic violence and 11 per cent of 1,175 women seeking restraining orders or support services reported observing animal cruelty by the perpetrator. In 1997, Ascione et al published a study reporting the findings of a US national survey of shelters. One shelter from nearly every US state was selected for participation. Shelter staff were surveyed about the coexistence of animal abuse and domestic violence and children's cruelty towards animals. Eighty-three per cent of workers answered 'yes' to the question 'have you observed the coexistence of domestic violence and pet abuse?' A total of 63 per cent of the staff also reported hearing children talk about animal abuse.

In a subsequent study, 38 women who sought shelter for domestic violence were interviewed directly (Ascione 1998). Ascione reported that, of the 74 per cent of women who owned a pet, 71 per cent reported that threats of harming, actual harm or killing of pets by the perpetrators had occurred. Also, approximately 30 per cent of children exposed to violence were themselves reported to be abusive towards animals. Ascione also found that a significant proportion (i.e. 18 per cent) of women delayed seeking shelter for themselves and their children for fear of their companion animal being harmed.

Quinlisk (1999) reported the findings of another survey conducted as part of the Domestic Violence Intervention Project. The study involved 72 women victims of domestic violence of whom 58 had pets. Of these women, 68 per cent reported violence directed towards their companion animals. In other cases, women reported experiencing threats to kill or to give away their pets. In 88 per cent of cases the abuse was committed in their presence, and in 76 per cent of cases children had been witness to the abuse. They found that 54 per cent of child witnesses copied the behaviours they had observed. Almost identical results from

an additional survey involving 32 women were also reported by Quinlisk.

More recently, Daniell (2001) reported the findings of a survey conducted by the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Ontario SPCA). One hundred and thirty women were surveyed, 80 of whom owned pets at the time of entering the women's refuge, and a further 31 had owned a pet some time in the past 12 months. The results were largely consistent with past studies. Of the 111 women owning pets, 44 per cent stated that their partner had previously abused or killed one or more of their pets; 42 per cent stated that their partner had threatened to hurt or kill one of their pets. Finally, as many as 43 per cent of respondents indicated that concern over their pet's welfare had caused them not to leave their abusive situation sooner.

A final study by Flynn (2000) attempted to replicate and extend upon previous research examining the human-animal violence link. Specifically, four questions were asked. These related to the nature and extent of pet abuse suffered by physically abused women, the importance of the pets as sources of emotional support for the women, whether they worried about their pet's welfare after seeking shelter, and whether their concern for the pet's welfare delayed their seeking refuge. One hundred and seven women from a South Carolina shelter were involved in the study, of whom 43 had pets. Of the pet owners, 47 per cent reported that they had experienced threat of harm or actual harm to their pet(s) by the perpetrator. In contrast to previous research, only two instances of pet abuse by children were reported. Regarding emotional importance, almost half (46 per cent) of the women reported their pet to be a very important source of emotional support. Not surprisingly, almost as many (40 per cent) reported being worried about their pet's safety and 19 per cent of the women reported delaying seeking shelter.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Although there has been only a handful of studies conducted to investigate the co-occurrence of human and animal violence, these studies leave little room for doubt that a relationship does exist. At the very least, these studies highlight that the detection of animal abuse should be of significant concern to professionals and researchers.

There are several important reasons underlining such cause for concern. First, animal cruelty involves the deliberate infliction of pain and suffering on another living being, and is against the law in most countries around the world. Second, it indicates the greater-than-chance likelihood that the perpetrator is involved in some other form of violence or criminal behaviour. Third, if the perpetrator is a young child, the animal cruelty may constitute an important marker for the possible development of conduct disorder in later years. Consequently it may be an important screening variable for selection into preventative intervention programs. Animal abuse by children is a real cause for concern since it may also indicate that these children have experienced, or are currently experiencing, similar abuse being perpetrated against themselves. Fourth, observation of animal cruelty by children may constitute one pathway of the learning of violent behaviour between an aggressor and a powerless other (Bandura et al 1961, 1963).

Better understanding the factors that identify those child victims of abuse who will themselves become perpetrators of abuse in adulthood (of which animal cruelty may be one), may contribute to the development of more effective preventative efforts aimed at interrupting such a developmental trajectory. Such preventative efforts, if successful, would, over time, significantly reduce the prevalence of disorders such as anti-social personality disorder and criminal

behaviours, such as partner and child abuse. These are important issues. They are highly deserving of research attention, and of coordinated responses on the part of all professional groups, including legal authorities, those working in the area of human welfare, and animal welfare professionals.

In modern industrialised Western societies, pet ownership is characteristic of most families, particularly those with children. In America alone, there are 40 million pet cats and 55 million pet dogs (Newby 1999, Shepard 1993). In 1995, 60 per cent of Australia's 6.2 million households owned a pet (Petnet 1995). Moreover, our companion animals are particularly prone to 'humanisation'. It is not uncommon for them to be assigned a relational status equal to that of humans. Studies have shown that companion animals are often accorded the status of family members (Morrow 1998). Given the important role that companion animals play in our lives, it would be surprising if the quality of humans' relationships with them did not provide valuable insight into the relationships among family members.

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