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Acknowledging the “Zoological Connection”: A Sociological Analysis of Animal Cruelty

COMMENTARY

ABSTRACT

Sociologists have largely ignored the role of animals in society. This article argues that human-animal interaction is a topic worthy of sociological consideration and applies a sociological analysis to one problematic aspect of human-animal relationships - animal cruelty. The article reformulates animal cruelty, traditionally viewed using a psychopathological model, from a sociological perspective. The article identifies social and cultural factors related to the occurrence of animal cruelty. Ultimately, animal cruelty is a serious social problem that deserves attention in its own right, not just because of its association with human violence.

Twenty years ago, Bryant (1979) chastised sociologists for their failure to address what he termed the “zoological connection.” Sociologists, he argued, “have tended not to recognize, to overlook, to ignore, or to neglect (some critics might say deservedly so) the influence of animals, or their import for, our social behavior, our relationships with other humans, and the directions which our social enterprise often takes” (p. 399).

Two decades later, with few notable exceptions, Bryant’s critique unfortunately is still justified. As Arluke and Sanders (1996) observed, “Most sociological research is anthropocentric (or human-centered) and focuses on relationships among humans”

(p. 2). Yet in the last few years, concerns about humans' relations with other animals have, in Beirne's (1999, p. 119) words, "infiltrated" sociology (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Nibert, 1994; Sanders, 1993; 1999; Human-animal interaction, 1994).

Sociological analysis of human-animal interaction, of the role of animals in society, is important for several reasons. According to Arluke and Sanders (1996), "It will show us, among other things, how meaning is socially constructed through interaction; how we organize our social world; and how we see our connection (or lack of it) to other living things" (p. 4).

This article applies a sociological analysis to one aspect of human-animal interaction - animal cruelty. In the spirit of Beirne (1997), the purpose is "to contribute to an as-yet-unconstituted sociology of animal abuse" (p. 318). Following Ascione (1993), animal cruelty is defined as "socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal" (p. 28). This definition excludes practices that are socially acceptable (e.g., the humane killing of farm animals, hunting, and the use of animals in research), as well as unintentional acts that have harmful consequences. Cruel behaviors could be acts of omission as well as commission. Pain, suffering, and distress encompass emotional or psychological pain (e.g., teasing, bestiality), as well as physical pain.

This analysis will focus on animal cruelty committed by individuals or small groups. It is this category of animal abuse that, much like the early research on wife or child abuse, has been explained almost exclusively using an individualistic, psychopathological perspective while ignoring social structural forces (Gelles, 1993). Just as with family violence, it is equally important to show how a sociological analysis can be applied to better explain this form of individual violence by humans against other animals.

Why Sociologists Should Be Interested In Animal Cruelty

There are many reasons why animal cruelty warrants attention from sociologists. First, research has revealed an association between animal cruelty and subsequent antisocial behavior, including interpersonal violence, both in childhood and adulthood, both within and outside families (Arluke, Levin, Luke,

& Ascione, 1999; Ascione, 1999). Second, little is known about the effects of witnessing animal cruelty or of having a companion animal abused (Flynn, 2000a). Third, given the popularity of companion animals, attempts to understand animal cruelty can tell us much about the symbolic interaction of humans and nonhumans, both in and outside families (Flynn, 2000c). Fourth, studying animal cruelty has the potential to add to our knowledge about inequality and the dynamics and abuses of social power. But most importantly, human maltreatment of animals is a serious social problem simply because of the suffering and death it causes animals. It has become increasingly recognized in recent years that animals are worthy of moral consideration, and their abuse is a serious problem deserving of attention, irrespective of its relationship to human violence (Agnew, 1998).

How Common Is Animal Cruelty?

Unlike child abuse or other forms of family violence, there are no reliable estimates of the incidence of animal cruelty. A national survey of 1,008 households conducted in 1996 found that one-sixth of respondents had witnessed an incidence of animal cruelty in the past five years (Lockwood, 1999).

Two recent studies of college students - one study from the Midwest (Miller & Knutson, 1997) and my own from the Southeast (Flynn, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a) - suggest that experiencing animal cruelty in childhood is surprisingly common. These studies used the same 10-item measure of exposure to animal cruelty, an adaptation of the Boat Inventory of Animal-Related Experiences (Boat, 1999). Both specifically excluded certain socially acceptable behaviors - killing for food, hunting, and mercy killing. The overall rates of animal abuse, as well as the rates for each type of abuse, were remarkably similar in these two studies. In each, approximately half of all students had experienced animal cruelty (either perpetrated or witnessed) during childhood, and about one in five had actually committed it. Further, both studies revealed that animal cruelty is much more common among males than females.

Social and Cultural Factors Related to Animal Cruelty

Psychologists, psychiatrists, and researchers in the fields of veterinary studies and social welfare have conducted most research on animal cruelty. This

research has employed a psychopathological explanatory model, assuming that animal abuse is an indicator or symptom of some mental defect or personality disorder (Beirne, 1999). Much of what we know about humans who abuse animals comes from clinical samples of children and adolescents (Rigdon & Tapia, 1977; Tapia, 1971), or from retrospective self-reports of incarcerated criminals (Felthous & Kellert, 1986; Kellert & Felthous, 1985; Ressler, Burgess, Hartman, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986; Tingle, Barnard, Robbins, Newman, & Hutchinson, 1986). All these studies analyze animal abuse at the individual level. With few exceptions, social and cultural factors have received little attention.

The context of animal cruelty is invariably a social one. Abusive treatment of animals usually results from our relationships with other humans. In families, battering husbands abuse companion animals to control and intimidate their wives (Ascione, 1998; Flynn, 2000b, 2000c). Abused children - who have learned painful lessons about power - abuse animals to satisfy their need to control and dominate others (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983). Sexually abused children witness their abusers hurt or kill the children's pets to guarantee their silence (Faller, 1990; Finkelhor, Williams, & Burns, 1988). In neighborhoods, dogs are shot because of anger at their owners. Adolescent males torture animals in response to social rejection or to gain the approval of their peers. Committing animal cruelty is likely to distort or inhibit empathy, making it even easier to disregard the feelings and lives of other beings - animal and human (Ascione, 1993). Finally, our attitudes about violence, families, and animals influence the societal response to animal cruelty and tell us much about ourselves. In short, animal cruelty is a social phenomenon.

Gender

One of the most consistent factors associated with the perpetration of animal abuse is gender. Almost all abusers are males. In early clinical studies on troubled youth (Tapia, 1971; Rigdon & Tapia, 1977) and in retrospective studies of criminals (Felthous & Kellert, 1986; Kellert & Felthous, 1985), male perpetrators predominate. In a recent study of animal cruelty cases prosecuted in Massachusetts from 1975 to 1996, 96.6% of offenders were male (Arluke & Luke, 1997). In my study of 267 college undergraduates, male students were nearly four times more likely than females to report abusing animals as a

child or adolescent. Slightly more than one-third of males (34.5%), but just fewer than 10% of females (9.3%), reported that they had been cruel to animals.

Age

Although most studies have focused on animal cruelty committed by youth, the limited data suggest that those prosecuted are more likely to be young adults. The Massachusetts study cited above shows that 27% of the offenders were teenagers, but 56% were under the age of 30 (Arluke & Luke, 1997). The average age of all offenders was 30. Thus, not unlike other criminal behavior, late adolescence and early adulthood are common times for the perpetration of animal cruelty.

Age also may influence the type of animal and the method of cruelty employed. Arluke & Luke (1997) found that adult perpetrators were more likely to harm dogs and to do so by shooting. Teens, on the other hand, were more likely to abuse cats, and the most common method was beating them.

These differences, in part, reflect different age statuses in society. Adult (male) perpetrators may feel as if they must protect their families and property and maintain the safety of the neighborhood, and dogs are likely to be perceived as a greater threat than cats. Adults also have greater access to firearms. Minors, on the other hand, may be more likely to commit an “expressive” form of cruelty in which the actual mistreatment is the sought-after goal, not retaliation against animal owners. In these circumstances, beating the animal is more appealing because it provides direct contact, and cats are smaller than dogs and thus easier to abuse in this manner.

Socio-economic Status

As with other forms of family violence, the abusive treatment of animals occurs at all socioeconomic levels. As with child abuse and wife abuse, however, the perpetrators may be represented disproportionately among lower socioeconomic individuals. Munro (1999) makes this point from her perspective as a veterinarian in the United Kingdom. In my sample of college students, respondents whose fathers failed to complete high school had rates of animal cruelty twice that of students with more educated fathers. Mothers’ education was unrelated to perpetration of animal cruelty as a child.

The rates of animal cruelty did not differ based on fathers' occupational status (blue collar vs. white collar). However, respondents whose mothers were employed in blue-collar occupations were twice as likely to have committed animal cruelty as children as those whose mothers worked in white-collar jobs or were not employed. These data suggest that mothers' occupational status may be an indicator of the overall socioeconomic status of the family. Mothers in blue-collar jobs are more likely to be from lower-class families where animal cruelty may be more common.

Childhood Socialization

Family violence. As with violence against humans, children may learn to abuse animals partly because their socialization experience has included violence in the family. For example, family violence research has demonstrated that multiple forms of family violence often occur in families and that childhood experience with violence in the family is related to use of violence as an adult (Gelles, 1997). Clinical studies have found that brutal fathers often may have abused male children who have abused animals. In the first study that examined the relationship between family violence and pet abuse, DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983) found that of New Jersey families identified by authorities as being involved in various forms of child abuse, 88% with physical abuse also had animal abuse. Fathers were the abusers in two-thirds of the homes; in the remainder, children were the abusers.

Apparently, the violence does not need to be severe for this learning to take place, at least for boys. In my college student sample, the more often boys were physically punished by their fathers, the more likely they were to commit animal cruelty. This relationship did not hold for boys spanked by their mother or for girls spanked by either parent (Flynn, 1999b). This finding is consistent with other studies that have found a relationship between receiving corporal punishment and engaging in antisocial behaviors (Straus, 1991, 1994).

It seems likely that much of children's animal cruelty would occur outside the view of parents. Further, anecdotal data suggest that parents and other authority figures may not always take seriously their children's violence to animals (Ascione, 1999; Boat, 1995). Consequently, if children's animal abuse is frequently unnoticed and unpunished, then parents may be unwittingly

condoning animal cruelty and, for boys, reinforcing masculine tendencies toward violence.

Peer group influence. There is some evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, that teenage boys may engage in animal cruelty to gain approval from their peers and to prove their masculinity. Compared with adult offenders in the Massachusetts study previously cited, minors were more likely to commit animal cruelty in the presence of others. Seven of eight adult suspects were alone when committing abuse, but nearly one-half of minors (48%) abused as part of a group (Arluke & Luke, 1997).

Societal Norms

Anti-cruelty statutes. At first glance, the legal proscription of animal abuse has enjoyed a long history in the United States. The world's oldest animal cruelty laws were passed in 1641 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Arkow, 1999). Currently, all 50 states have anti-cruelty statutes, most of which have remained relatively unchanged for the past century. In 29 states, animal cruelty is only a misdemeanor (Lacroix, 1999). According to many observers (Arkow, 1999; Francione, 1996; Lacroix, 1999), current laws fail to protect animals and have little deterrent effect. They are ineffective because they were enacted not to protect animals but to protect humans from other humans and to do so while only minimally interfering with property rights. Since animals have always been, and still are, considered property, they have no legal standing.

Legal professionals have been reluctant to legislate and enforce animal cruelty laws for a number of reasons that include (a) society's ambivalent attitudes toward animals, (b) difficulty in defining cruelty, and (c) a lack of funding and personnel for enforcement that has led states to delegate enforcement authority to humane organizations. In addition, most laws are misdemeanors and thus are not prosecuted aggressively (Lacroix, 1999).

Of the 268 cases of animal cruelty that were prosecuted in Massachusetts from 1975 to 1996, less than half resulted in a guilty verdict. Only one-third of those prosecuted were fined, 21% had to pay restitution, one-fifth were given probation, 10% went to jail, 10% were required to undergo counseling, and 7% were ordered to do community service (Arluke & Luke, 1997). The minimal nature of these sentences is even more distressing when we

consider that these cases, because they were taken to trial, are likely to represent the most serious offenses.

In short, it should be no surprise that animal cruelty occurs when it is only mildly sanctioned through weak laws, sporadic prosecution, and minimal sentences. Furthermore, with America's historical legacy of honoring and protecting both family privacy and property rights, the rights of animals - as long as animals legally are considered property - always will be outweighed by the rights of human property owners - who, all too often, also are their abusers.

There is evidence that attitudes are changing and that animal cruelty may be taken more seriously. In recent years, there has been a shift to strengthen animal cruelty statutes. As of August 1998, 21 states have made felonies of some forms of cruelty toward animals, and most of these changes came about in the last ten years (Lockwood, 1999).

Public attitudes toward animals and animal abuse. The public's attitudes toward animals are ambivalent and contradictory. In general, Americans seem to be willing to grant animals some level of moral consideration. In a 1995 poll conducted by the Associated Press, two-thirds of respondents agreed that "an animal's right to live free of suffering should be just as important as a person's right to live free from suffering" (Agnew, 1998).

Yet, as Agnew (1998) points out, most of the harm done to animals - hunting and trapping, factory farming, product testing, animal experimentation, and use of animals for entertainment - is legal. The majority of Americans, by their attitudes and actions, seem to support these practices. In addition, the powerful institutions of religion, science, and government support the cultural exploitation of animals.

It may be that the high level of socially accepted violence toward animals contributes to unacceptable violence - animal abuse. Straus (1991, 1994) developed such an argument to explain the relationship of receiving corporal punishment to engaging in interpersonal aggression. In his "cultural spillover theory," Straus proposed that the greater level of socially approved violence, the greater the level of illegitimate violence. Baron and Straus (1988) found that states with the highest level of legitimate violence had the high-

est homicide rates. The same relationship may exist with regard to abuse of animals. The more we harm animals in ways that society deems acceptable, the more likely individuals may be to engage in animal cruelty, and the less likely individuals and social institutions may be to seriously sanction it.

Religious beliefs. The Judeo-Christian tradition contributes to norms that enable humans to mistreat animals (Singer, 1990). Christianity's anthropocentric view that humans are superior to animals and have dominion over them reinforces animals' status as less powerful beings, making it easier to exploit and harm them. A study of Christian groups in Australia found that members of more conservative denominations held less humane attitudes toward animals (Bowd & Bowd, 1989).

Cultural attitudes toward specific species. Some animals are perceived more negatively than others and thus are more likely candidates for abuse. Cats, second only to dogs as the most commonly owned pets, are victims of cultural prejudice. Felthous and Kellert (1987) found that the 16 aggressive criminals - who had substantial animal cruelties in childhood - were more likely to have abused cats - who suffered a greater variety of cruelties - than any other animal.

Social Power, Inequality, and Patriarchy

In virtually every way, humans enjoy power over other animals. Legally, animals are considered property, and this makes them easy targets for abuse. Because humans determine the laws and norms regarding how animals are treated - which animals are worthy of legal protection - and given the ineffective response of the criminal justice system to animal cruelty, abusers hold positions of superior power and are not likely to be deterred from their harmful actions. Finally, animals are the only victims of systematic discrimination and exploitation who truly cannot speak on their own behalf.

Almost all animal abusers tend to select victims who are smaller and physically weaker than the abuser. Dogs, cats, and small animals (rabbits, birds, rodents, and reptiles) are the most common victims of animal cruelty (Arluke & Luke, 1997; Flynn, 1999b). Felthous and Kellert's (1987) study of adult men (mostly aggressive criminals) who had perpetrated animal cruelty in childhood found that typically their target animals were harmless vertebrates. Few reported abusing animals because they were dangerous or because the

animal had attacked them. As the authors noted, “Harmless vertebrate animals are handier, safer, and more plentiful than dangerous vertebrates” (Felthous & Kellert, 1987, p. 1716).

Rather than view animal abuse as the result of a power imbalance between humans and animals, feminist scholars have argued that animal abuse stems from patriarchy. Male violence against animals, like violence against women and children, reflects male dominance and control (Adams, 1994, 1995). Not only are the vast majority of perpetrators of animal cruelty male, but also complainants are typically female (Arluke & Luke, 1997). Further, there is evidence that violence against animals often accompanies violence against women and children in families. Abusive males often threaten or abuse companion animals in order to threaten, intimidate, or control other family members. Felthous and Kellert (1987) speculated that the hatred of cats reported by their male aggressive criminal subjects might indicate a conscious or subconscious hatred of women. The disadvantaged status of women, children, and animals in a male-dominated society enables violent men to victimize members of all three groups.

Animals as Family Members

Americans are more likely to have pets than children. Approximately 6 of 10 households have companion animals, and pets are even more common in families with children. Companion animals can be found in 70% of households with children under six and in 78% of households with children over six (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1997). In the vast majority of homes, companion animals are considered members of the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Siegel, 1993).

Unfortunately, because of their status as family members, companion animals, like women and children, are vulnerable to abuse. Decades of family violence research have revealed that families are “violence-prone interaction settings” (Gelles & Straus, 1979). Secondary or anecdotal evidence of animal abuse can be found in studies of battered women (Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992; Walker, 1979), child abuse (Gelles & Straus, 1988), lesbian battering (Renzetti, 1992), and sibling abuse (Wiehe, 1992). Now, companion animals have joined the so-called “hidden” victims of family violence (Gelles, 1997).

I already have reviewed the two studies that show a connection between violence to children and children's abuse of animals (DeViney et al., 1983; Flynn, 1999b). Two other studies have examined pet abuse and the role of companion animals in the lives of battered women. In the first published study linking pet abuse and wife abuse, Ascione (1998) surveyed 38 clients at a Utah shelter for battered women about their partners' and children's cruelty to companion animals. Seventy-four percent of the women either currently owned pets or in the past year had owned pets. Seventy-one percent of these women reported that their partner had threatened, harmed, or killed at least one of their companion animals. In a second study, I surveyed 107 clients at intake at a battered women's shelter in South Carolina (Flynn, 2000b). Approximately 40% of clients had owned or currently owned pets, and nearly half - 46.5% - (almost one-fifth of all clients) said that their pets had been threatened or harmed by their abusive partner. In both studies, 20% of the women said that they delayed seeking shelter out of concern for their pet's safety.

The evidence from these few studies, along with the anecdotal data from previous family violence research, has begun to establish a connection between violence to animals and violence in families. When children abuse animals, they may be imitating violence that they have experienced at home - either between their parents or violence that their parents have inflicted upon them. Children in homes where wife abuse or child abuse has occurred also may have witnessed animal abuse. Violent males may have threatened or harmed the companion animals of their female partner and/or children, creating a climate of terror for human and animal victims.

Toward an Inclusive Sociology of Animal Abuse

Finally, failure to acknowledge and consider the cruel treatment of animals as worthy of study contributes to animals' continued exploitation and abuse. Even when limiting our focus to companion animals, their status as family members means that the potential for extensive abuse is great. A half billion companion animals live in American households (Plous, 1993), suggesting that a substantial amount of pain and suffering has gone undetected and untreated.

Yet, even if animals are not members of human families, they are valuable, living beings who are entitled to live free from suffering. Because much of

animal cruelty outside families is committed in private by individuals acting alone and is perpetrated against smaller animals in the wild, it is impossible to know the extent of animal victimization.

Solot (1997) notes that, unlike any other form of violence, its association with violence against people almost entirely motivates the published research on animal abuse. However, she argues, "It is crucial that those in the field of violence toward animals not accept being characterized as chroniclers of a symptom of larger problems, but that they insist that their studies be seen as having intrinsic worth" (p. 262). Or, as Beirne (1999) has stated, "... perhaps society will eventually reach the conclusion that animal abuse should be censured not because it is similar to the abuse of humans but because it is loathsome to animals themselves" (p. 140).

Criminologists have led the way in studying animal abuse sociologically and, in turn, in reconceptualizing it in a less anthropocentric way (Agnew, 1998; Beirne, 1997, 1999; Cazaux, 1998). Beirne (1999) has argued powerfully for what he calls a "nonspeciesist criminology," which recognizes animal abuse as a legitimate object of study in its own right, not just because it is related to inter-human conflict and violence. Agnew (1998) has proposed the only full-fledged theory of animal abuse. Calling it a "social-psychological" theory, Agnew draws on social learning, strain, and control theories.

In an earlier article, Beirne (1997) had applied such a nonspeciesist approach to the analysis of bestiality. Because bestiality parallels the victimization of women, children, and infants, he proposed replacing the anthropocentric term "bestiality" with the term "interspecies sexual assault." Beirne pointed out that, like sexual assaults against women and children, human-animal sexual relations typically are coercive, are painful and sometimes deadly to animals, and that animals are unable to give their consent or to report their abuse.

Along the same lines, Agnew (1998) proposes the adoption of a much broader definition of animal abuse - "any act that contributes to the pain or death of an animal or that otherwise threatens the welfare of an animal" (179). This definition includes legal practices such as factory farming and animal experimentation that some individuals may not consider abusive but that account for most of the harm inflicted upon animals. By including socially accepted practices, abuse "is not tied to the prevailing beliefs about animals, includ-

ing beliefs about the acceptability or necessity of activities that are harmful to animals. Such beliefs vary by time and place and are largely, if not entirely, social products." Agnew (1998) states, "If we accept current beliefs, we let those political and social actors with the greatest power determine our definition of animal abuse" (p. 180).

Conclusion

Sociological analysis has much to offer our understanding of human-non-human animal relationships. We must remember Bryant's (1979) admonition 20 years ago that

Our social enterprise is not composed of humans alone. Creatures of all variety are inextricably involved in many of our behavioral activities and play important interactive roles in society. . . . As students of society and social behavior, we can no more appropriately ignore the zoological dimension, than an analysis of drama can ignore the seminal actors in a play. (p. 417)

The time has come for sociologists to acknowledge the significant and extensive role that nonhuman animals play in the lives of humans. Beyond that, it is important that human treatment of animals be investigated not just for what it can teach us about human interaction, but because animals are moral beings whose lives have intrinsic worth, apart from our relationship to them.

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Note

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