

Cruel Intentions? Examining the link between Childhood Animal Cruelty and Progression to Inter-human Violence in Adulthood

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Introduction

Within societal norms, animal cruelty (AC) is considered a strong indicator of psychological illness or moral perversion in the perpetrator. However, multifaceted modern animal-human relationships complicate how we protect animals against cruelty. This complexity arises from the animal's role in society, the moral consideration that role is given (pest/production/companion), and from the variety of cultural norms that influence animal treatment in today's multi-cultural society (Benetato *et al.*, 2011).

The correlation between childhood acts of AC and adult acts of inter-human violence (IHV) and intimate partner violence/domestic violence (IPV/DV) is often referred to as the "progression (or graduation) hypothesis" (PH) (Flynn, 2011). This review focuses on recent literature attempting to quantify the PH and how this in turn can improve companion dog welfare.

Discussion

Anecdotally, the belief that children who harm animals progress to IHV/IPV is well accepted. Quantitatively, small samples, varied methodologies, conflicting data, and the absence of one widely accepted definition of AC have created debate concerning the validity of the PH (Flynn, 2011). Hensley *et al.* (2012) contend that AC deserves further research for reasons that can be rudimentarily summarised by the following points: AC is a serious antisocial behaviour inciting public concern; prior contradictory findings about the PH; and scarcity of quantitative data about how AC acts are typically committed. Recent research examines the nexus between AC and IPV/DV (Krienert *et al.*, 2012), childhood AC methods and the link to IHV (Hensley *et al.*, 2012), and IPV/DV connectivity to animal welfare, particularly for highly anthropomorphised animals such as dogs (Tiplady *et al.*, 2012).

The American Pet Products Association 2011-2012 National Pet Owners Survey data indicate: approximately 78.2 million owned dogs; an average 39% of households own at least one dog; 28% own two dogs; and 12% own three or more dogs (HSUSA, 2012). In comparison, 2.8 million Australian households included dogs in 2005 (i.e., 38% of total households with pets) (RSPCA, 2012). These statistics are important, particularly in light of Krienert *et al.*'s (2012) assertion that as a source of emotional support for human IPV/DV victims, the family pet is frequently exposed to AC. Considering the HSUSA (2012) and RSPCA (2012) ownership data, it can be conceived that large numbers of pet dogs become potential AC targets.

Hensley *et al.* (2012) suggest that the relationship between AC methods and IHV has historically been inconclusive and hypothesise that robust data supporting or discrediting the PH could be gathered if factors such as animal species, method and motivation for abuse were individually considered. Their research aimed to replicate a study by Tallichet *et al.* (2005), but with important updates. Hitting and kicking were identified as discrete methods of AC, robbery included as a violent crime with number of violent crime commissions then being differentiated from actual convictions. The study then examined the relationship between retrospectively self-identified AC methods and IHV. The methods identified were: drowning; hitting; shooting; kicking; choking; burning; and sex, with data analyses demonstrating that the most reliable variable for predicting progression from AC to adult IHV was childhood sex with animals.

Similarly, Levin and Arluke (2009) state that a "hands-on" method of torturing highly anthropomorphised animals, such as dogs, is a common characteristic of serial killers. They argue that methods of violence are similar for both their human and animal victims, and so suggest new research avenues sampling perpetrators who torture dogs in a "hands-on" way as a step toward more rigorously testing the PH.

The theory that AC co-occurs with IPV/DV is validated by the research of Tiplady *et al.* (2012). This research surveyed the effects of IPV/DV on companion animal welfare, the types of animals affected, and range of animal involvement. Tiplady *et al.* (2012) used Fisher's exact test and found dogs, as a proportion of the total pet population, were most likely to be the target animal in cases of IPV/DV. Further, Tiplady *et al.*'s (2012) research gathered data about the type of physical abuse inflicted on dogs during IPV. There were several different forms of physical abuse, including kicking; hitting/punching; abusive holding (e.g., holding by ears or hanging); belting; poisoning; and decapitation. These types of physical abuse are either identical, or very similar to the "hands-on" animal torture described by Levin and Arluke (2009) and the methods of AC identified by Hensley *et al.* (2012).

These similarities indicate important links between empirical studies conducted by sociologists, criminologists and veterinarians, while simultaneously creating a case for sampling perpetrators of IHV/IPV/DV in future PH research. Further, all prior samples were drawn from a subset of the wider community. That is, people who had self identified as either having been convicted of IHV, or having been the target of IPV/DV. Therefore, to improve data validity in future PH research, samples and control groups could be drawn randomly from the wider community for a more representative population.

Conclusion

In summary, Hensley *et al.* (2012) point out that if AC and IHV risk factors are correctly identified, then appropriate intervention programs can be implemented for those at risk of demonstrating such antisocial behaviour. Further, Tiplady *et al.* (2012) remind us that by increasing the veterinary profession's understanding of IPV's animal victims (most often dogs), IPV can be more reliably identified and appropriate support provided to animal and human victims. This point merits substantial further research. Finally, Krienert *et al.* (2012) recommend a national method for systematic cross-collection of information on AC and IPV/DV to identify the scope of the problem and secure sufficient funding to implement effective prevention and protection programs.

This review reflects on the successes and shortcomings of prior research efforts, and highlights the important role of the veterinarian in understanding, identifying, and quantifying instances of AC in future, to improve the welfare of dogs. Collaborative scholarly activity across academic and professional boundaries would create an excellent opportunity for further hypothesis development, empirical research and more reliable findings to inform legislation and social policy makers (Flynn, 2011). Combined, this could conceivably create an environment of improved welfare for both dogs and their human companions.

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