

Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence: Exploring the Link

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Exploring the Links between Animal Abuse and Human Violence

The link between animal cruelty and violent antisocial behaviour is now largely accepted by the scientific and law enforcement communities and is actively researched within disciplines such as criminology and psychology.¹ At its most basic level, law enforcement agencies have identified that most serial killers have a history of animal abuse and consider that animal abuse can be an indicator of future violent offending. The Progression Thesis essentially argues that offenders start by abusing small animals, progress onto abusing larger animals and eventually escalate to human violence.² However, the strength and certainty of the link between animal abuse and human violence requires cautious consideration. While the link is widely acknowledged, and supported by the evidence of some research studies, it must also be accepted that animal abuse does not *automatically* escalate into violent behaviour towards humans. Animal abuse is only one possible determining factor

among several which indicate a propensity toward human violence, albeit an important one that demonstrates certain violent offender traits. MacDonald³ identified three specific behavioural characteristics associated with sociopathic behaviour: animal cruelty, obsession with fire starting and bedwetting (past age five). The MacDonald triad was instrumental in linking these characteristics to violent behaviours, particularly homicide, and in identifying cruelty to animals as a *possible* indicator of future violent behaviour. Essentially, MacDonald linked poor impulse control, thrill-seeking and an inclination towards violence and inflicting harm on others as traits shared by sociopathic offenders. Subsequent studies have confirmed that cruelty to animals is a common behaviour in children and adolescents who grow up to become violent criminals.⁴

This article looks specifically at the link between animal abuse and domestic violence as one aspect of the link between animal abuse and

interpersonal violence; noting that research consistently identifies that where one occurs the other is also likely.⁵ In particular, it discusses the link between animal abuse and masculinities arguing that much domestic animal abuse involving companion animals is caused by and is a product of masculinities and power dynamics within domestic relationships. Accordingly, animal abuse and domestic abuse, particularly spousal abuse, are arguably linked as part of a continuum of abuse directed by male figures towards more vulnerable members of their households.

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¹ See Robert Agnew, 'The Causes of Animal Abuse: A Social Psychological Analysis' *Theoretical Criminology* (1998) 2; Arnold Arluke, *Just a Dog: Understanding Animal Cruelty and Ourselves* (Temple University Press 2006); Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, 'Reducing the Link's False Positive Problem' in Andrew Linzey (ed.), *The Link Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, Eastbourne: (Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

² See, for example Suzanne Conboy-Hill, *Animal Abuse and Interpersonal Violence* (The Companion Animal Behaviour Therapy Study Group 2000). However, it

should be noted that a complexity exists in respect of the progression thesis such that it is considerably less straightforward than it at first appears and arguably consists of several different propositions concerning the likelihood of animal abuse and human violence co-existing.

³ John M MacDonald, 'The Threat to Kill' (1963) *American Journal of Psychiatry* 120.

⁴ See, for example - James Hutton, J.S. (1998) 'Animal Abuse as a Diagnostic Approach in Social Work: A Pilot Study' in Randall Lockwood and Frank Ascione (eds), *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application* (Purdue University Press 1998); Allan Felthous and Stephen Kellert, 'Childhood Cruelty to Animals and Later Aggression Against People: A Review' (1987) *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144.

⁵ Andrew Linzey, (ed.), *The Link Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence* (Sussex Academic Press 2009); Randall Lockwood and Frank Ascione, (1998). *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application* (Purdue University Press 1998)

Perspectives on Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence

The mistreatment of domestic animals can occur for many reasons and can be either active or passive. *Active* mistreatment has historically been a core concern of anti-cruelty statutes and academic and policy discussions of animal abuse. These primarily focus on *intentional* mistreatment or deliberate neglect where intent to cause animal harm is a significant factor and an indicator of either anti-social personality disorder, mental illness or some form of abuse within the family. *Passive* mistreatment can include neglect caused by 'failure to act' such that companion animals are not properly cared for and harm is caused either as a result of misunderstanding an animal's needs or through deliberate neglect. Arguably beliefs play an important part in the treatment of animals⁶ and anthropocentric notions of animals as being 'things'; arguably reflected in their legal status as property⁷ influences the extent to and manner in which animal abuse is contextualized. Distinguishing between *accidental* and *deliberate* neglect is important, particularly when considering the extent to which accidental neglect is an indicator of domestic problems. Some neglect may occur as a consequence of simple misunderstanding of appropriate care needs or through the process of companion animals being bought for children who are either unable to care for them adequately or who simply grow out of the relationship. However neglect of animals can also indicate wider issues of neglect and failings of care within a family, such as those childcare failures and neglect of children which constitutes abuse.⁸

The UK's Animal Welfare Act 2006 imposes a duty to provide animal welfare in respect of companion animals. In one sense companion animals, recognised as sentient beings by the European Union⁹ and afforded protection for their individual behavioural needs by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, should be treated as individuals within a family unit. The law, clarified by *R (on the application of Gray and another) v Aylesbury Crown Court* [2013] EWHC 500 (Admin), identifies that an objective standard of care is required and that criminal liability exists for unnecessary suffering caused to an animal either by act or omission. This is the case where the person responsible for a companion animal's welfare either knew or should have known that their actions were likely to cause unnecessary suffering whether by negligent act or omission. The issue is whether avoidable suffering has been caused to a non-human animal and not the state of mind of the person concerned. However, the focus of this article is largely the state of mind and intentions of those committing animal abuse where a link to human violence is concerned. Animal abuse is arguably often an outlet for male aggression perpetrated by adult male offenders or child victims within a domestic setting such that animals bear the brunt of, or are at risk of, suffering from violence from a number of sources within a family. Some animal abuse is a means to

control other family members and is indicative of a wider violent or abusive family dynamic, one in which dysfunctional patriarchal power is enforced through inflicting harm on weaker or more vulnerable members of a family who may be unable to defend themselves (including non-human animals). The threat of violence to animals is also a powerful control tool and children, spouses or partners can also be manipulated into remaining with an abuser by means of the control exercised over non-human companions.¹⁰ Animal abuse may thus be less about the direct animal victim and, in some circumstances, animal abuse is used to intimidate, control or coerce women and children within an abusive relationship either to accede to a perpetrator's demands or desires or to keep silent about their abuse and suffering within the family and domestic environment.

Anti-cruelty laws generally make it an offence to inflict pain or suffering on companion animals, frequently phrasing such abuse in the context of causing 'unnecessary suffering' reflecting the fact that some harm caused to animals is considered unavoidable.¹¹ Indeed some forms of accidental harm or harm that constitutes a 'necessary' part of human-companion animal relationships (such as neutering, spaying or castrating) may constitute lawful suffering; subject to being carried out in accordance with regulatory or licensing requirements (i.e. by registered veterinary professionals at licensed premises). In effect, some laws argue that by reducing animals into captivity and through the process of domesticating certain species over a period of time we have an obligation to ensure that

Andrew Linzey, (ed) *The Link Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, Eastbourne: (Sussex Academic Press 2009).

⁶ Pamela Frasch, 'Addressing Animal Abuse: The Complementary Roles of Religion, Secular Ethics, and the Law' (2000) *Society & Animals* 8(3)

⁷ Mike Radford, *Animal Welfare Law in Britain* (Oxford University Press 2000)

⁸ Dawn Hawksworth and Rachel Balen, 'Animal Cruelty and Child Welfare: The Health Visitor's Perspective' in

⁹ Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

¹⁰ Angela Browne, 'Violence against Women by Male Partners: Prevalence, Outcomes, and Policy

Implications' (1993) *American Psychologist* 48

¹¹ Joan Schaffner, *An Introduction to Animals and the Law* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011)

they do not suffer harm while they are dependent on humans for food and shelter and unable to live independent lives, or at least that any suffering should be tightly controlled.

Companion animals are often part of the family and may be attuned to family tension and the impact of violence within domestic settings. Evidence shows that some animals experience, or at least respond to, the distress of their owners.¹² In addition to physical abuse and neglect, animals may also suffer from psychological abuse and be subject to the emotional stress of living in fear from domestic abuse or other forms of violence. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 arguably reflects this by extending the definition of unnecessary suffering to include psychological distress caused to animals and by requiring that owners and responsible persons consider the impact of the home environment on companion animals. In domestic settings, animal abuse is often indicative of the expressions of masculinity and male responses to challenging social situations that are indicative of hegemonic masculinity. Animal abuse and related animal harm is sometimes associated with power, especially patriarchal power, and in situations where a perceived loss of power or challenge to male authority arises violence towards animals may occur. Weber¹³ identified the hierarchical nature of power within the family and its association with distinct family roles, primarily based around the father as the central power conduit with power circulating down to lesser family members.¹⁴

Weber's theory was primarily based around historical notions of the nuclear family rather than contemporary post-feminist forms of the family (e.g. single-parent families). Yet masculinities remain significant factors in domestic violence and animal abuse and, according to feminist perspectives, reflect the legacy of patriarchal power as a means through which dominant males use violence as an expression of power to control less powerful individuals within their immediate sphere of influence.¹⁵ Companion animals have the least power within a family dynamic, partly through being unable to speak and exercise their 'rights' but also by virtue of their legal status as 'property'.¹⁶ Arguably domestic animal abuse is part of the wider dominance and exploitation of less powerful individuals by males through which a dominant male is able to control his immediate environment and increase both acceptance of his will and reliance on his authority.¹⁷

'Domestic violence' is somewhat of an umbrella term used to describe the main forms of domestic abuse dealt with by criminal justice agencies; primarily spouse or partner abuse perpetrated by male offenders against women.¹⁸ However, domestic violence is not confined solely to male-female partner abuse and includes child abuse, elder abuse and animal abuse; particularly that animal abuse which is linked to partner or other forms of domestic abuse and interpersonal violence. Criminologists and psychologists also argue that definitions of domestic abuse need to

extent to include a range of abusive behaviours occurring either within the home or within the wider domestic environment and family (including extended family) relationships.¹⁹ Domestic abuse can thus incorporate physical, psychological or sexual abuse, and while policy and law enforcement attention is often concentrated on physical or sexual abuse directed either at female partners or children, psychological abuse is equally important²⁰ and particularly relevant where animal abuse is concerned. Threats made against a companion animal can cause extreme emotional distress in both children and adult partners and can be an effective tool for an offender to both control other family members and those dependent on them or to influence control over a family dynamic. This control is particularly damaging for those vulnerable family members who have intense emotional attachments to companion animals. Several studies have identified a causal link between animal abuse and domestic abuse concluding that in homes where domestic abuse takes place animal abuse is often present and that the

“Threats made against a companion animal can cause extreme emotional distress in both children and adult partners”

¹²Sherry Schleuter, 'Animal Abuse and Law Enforcement' in Frank Ascione and Phil Arkow (eds), *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention* (Purdue University Press 1999); Peter Weigand, V. Schmidt and M. Kleiber, 'German Shepherd Dog is Suspected of Sexually Abusing a Child' (1999) *International Journal of Legal Medicine* 112

¹³Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (Edited by Talcott Parsons) (The Free Press 1964)

¹⁴Angus Nurse, *Animal Harm: Perspectives on Why People Harm and Kill Animals* (Ashgate 2013)

¹⁵Josephine Donovan, 'Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue' (2006) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31(2)

¹⁶Gary Francione, 'Reflections on Animals, Property and Rain without Thunder' (2007) *Law and Contemporary Problems* 70(1); Schaffner (n 11)

¹⁷Carol J Adams, 'Bringing Peace Home: A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on the Abuse of Women, Children and Pet Animals' (1994) *Hypatia* 9

¹⁸Rebecca Morley and Audrey Mullender, A. *Preventing Domestic Violence to Women, Police Research Group Crime Prevention Unit Series: Paper 48* (Home Office 1994)

¹⁹Frank Ascione, 'What Veterinarians Need to Know about the Link between Animal Abuse and Interpersonal Violence' (Proceedings of the 137th Annual Meeting of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Salt Lake City, 25 July 2000); Mary Louise Petersen and David P. Farrington, 'Types of Cruelty: Animals and Childhood Cruelty, Domestic Violence, Child and Elder Abuse' in Andrew Linzey (ed.) *The Link Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence* (Sussex Academic Press 2009)

²⁰K Daniel O'Leary, 'Psychological Abuse: A Variable Deserving Critical Attention in Domestic Violence' (1999) *Violence and Victims* 14(1)

two types of abuse are inextricably linked.²¹ For example, Moffit and Caspi²² identified that young children and partner violence are concentrated in the same segment of the population, thus many children witness partner violence within the home and where partner abuse is present children may also be exposed to animal abuse. Baldry's survey of 1,356 9–17-year-olds examining interpersonal violence in Rome found exposure to animal abuse by peers reported by 63.7 percent of respondents and an exposure rate of 60.9 percent to non-parental animal abuse.²³ Pagani *et al.*'s study of 800 Roman children identified that 65 percent of respondents had witnessed some form of animal abuse,²⁴ while Thompson and Gullone's Australian study of a sample of 281 adolescents (aged between 12 and 18) found that 77.5 percent of the sample had witnessed animal abuse at least once.²⁵ However, the relationship between animal abuse and domestic violence is complex. It lacks the certainty that an individual engaged in spousal or child abuse *must* also be abusing animals in the home but provides that where an individual in a

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position of power within the family (most often the dominant male) is abusing animals, other forms of abuse such as spousal or child abuse are also *likely* to be occurring. Active or passive animal harm in the form of animal cruelty can thus be part of a cycle of abuse within the family, or even a consequence of domestic abuse.

Morley and Mullender identified that 'domestic violence is almost always a multiple victimisation crime'²⁶ as attacks (whether verbal or physical) by the same perpetrator are almost always repeated, although the frequency with which this occurs is dependent on the motivation of the offender.²⁷ Animal abuse of companion animals can be indicative of other abuse within the home and is significant in terms of influencing subsequent animal harm caused by children and adolescents, and the escalation of animal harm either as control or punishment carried out during a deteriorating (or escalating) cycle of partner abuse.

Animal Abuse and Spousal Abuse

The evidence base for a link between animal abuse and spousal abuse or partner battering has been steadily growing over the last decade or so. Studies such as that carried out by Ascione *et al.* who sampled around 50 battered women's shelters, one from each US state (excluding Utah) and the District of Columbia which met their selection criteria of providing overnight (residential) accommodation, found that 84 percent of the shelters confirmed that women who came to the shelters

talked about incidents of pet abuse, 63 percent confirmed that children who came to the shelters talked about pet abuse and 83 percent of the shelters confirmed the co-existence of domestic abuse and pet abuse.²⁸ Subsequently Flynn has concluded that 'among battered women with pets, between approximately one-half and three-fourths report that their companion animals have been threatened or actually harmed by their intimate partners'.²⁹

Women's close relationships with companion animals are a significant factor in domestic abuse for a variety of reasons. The close relationship makes companion animals the target of abuse for abusers seeking to inflict maximum suffering, and concern for a companion can significantly influence women's response to the abuse they receive, including their willingness to remain in the home or interact with the authorities. Companion animals are often important sources of emotional support for women who are involved in abusive relationships, who are frequently isolated and arguably suffer from low self-esteem and have limited support networks.³⁰ For some women in such relationships, a companion animal can represent the only source of unconditional love within the domestic setting, especially where children may be seen to side with or respond to the abuser. (Children's animal abuse can become a normalised response to domestic violence as emulating the violence seen within the home can be a means through which children make sense of the violence they are witnessing and

²¹See, for example: Frank Ascione, Claudia Weber and David Wood, 'The Abuse of Animals and Domestic Violence: A National Survey of Shelters for Women Who Are Battered' (1997) *Society and Animals*, 5(3); Shari Lewchanin and Ellen Zimmerman, *Clinical Assessment of Juvenile Animal Cruelty* (Biddle Publishing Company and Audenreed Press 2000)

²²Terrie Moffit and Avshalom Caspi, 'Preventing the inter-generational continuity of antisocial behaviour: Implications from partner violence research' in David Farrington and Jeremy Coid (eds.), *Primary Prevention of antisocial behaviour* (Cambridge University Press 2003)

²³Anna Baldry, 'Animal Abuse and Exposure to

Interparental Violence in Italian Youth' (2003) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18(3)

²⁴Camilla Pagani, Francesco Robustelli and Frank Ascione, 'Italian Youths' Attitudes Toward and Concern for Animals' (2007) *Anthrozoos* 20(3)

²⁵Kelly Thompson and Eleonora Gullone, 'An Investigation into the Association between the Witnessing of Animal Abuse and Adolescents' Behaviour towards Animals' (2006) *Society and Animals* 14

²⁶Morley and Mullender (n18) 5

²⁷Graham Farrell, Ken Clark, Dan Ellingworth and Ken Pease, 'Of Targets and Supertargets: A Routine

Activity Theory of High Crime Rates' (2005) *Internet Journal of Criminology*

²⁸Ascione *et al.* (n 21). It should be noted that the survey methodology was purposely selective and many shelter programmes would not fall within its sampling methodology.

²⁹Clifton P. Flynn, 'Women Battering, Pet Abuse, and Human-Animal Relationships' in Andrew Linzey (ed.) *The Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence* (Sussex Academic Press 2009)

³⁰J.J. Gayford, 'Wife Battering: A Preliminary Survey of 100 Cases' (1975) *British Medical Journal*; Erin Pizzey and Jeff Shapiro, *Prono to Violence* (Hamlyn 1982)

seek to gain the attention of the dominant male.) For women without children, a companion animal can be the primary source of love, emotional support and can even be a confidante within a domestic setting where an abuser restricts access to other sources of support. This close relationship means that male abusers may deliberately target companion animals, calculating that the threat of abuse against the one remaining 'ally' that a vulnerable woman has in the family can be an especially powerful motivator for 'compliance'. In addition, evidence suggests that some victims of domestic abuse eventually come to accept the 'norm' of the abuse that they experience but remain distressed at witnessing the abuse of others within the family, especially a loved companion.³¹ Abusers armed with the knowledge that targeting their abuse at a companion animal is an effective means of control and punishment, utilise this technique to secure control and compliance; sometimes going so far as to force the battered spouse's involvement in the animal abuse or to encourage their offspring to commit abuse.

Evidence shows that women who are in abusive relationships have usually endured the abuse for a considerable period of time before they finally leave the abuser,³² thus repeat victimization is a factor in both the spousal abuse and the associated animal harm. Victims of domestic abuse may be fearful not just for their own welfare but for those of dependents such as children and companion animals. Thus in order for victims of violence to escape an abusive home and relationship, they need to find shelter not just for themselves and children but also for any companions. Ascione et al.'s work³³ found that many battered

women's shelters are unable to house 'pets', a policy that appears to be widely replicated and which leaves the abuse survivor with the choice of staying within the abusive relationship or leaving their companions behind. This can be a significant factor in the cycle of abuse, allowing abusive partners not only to make threats against the companion animal which force a battered partner to remain in the home, but also to inflict harm on an animal as a way of controlling their partner. Concern over a companion animal left behind, whether in the care of a friend (who may then become the target of attention from the abuser) or which remains in the home, can be a considerable source of anxiety where the abuse which took place may even be sufficient to force a return to the family home out of concern for the non-human family member. Vulnerable women, even those fearful for their own safety, may be unable to further endure the idea that their absence from the home will allow the abuse of others to continue.

Animal Abuse and Future Violent Offending

Domestic abuse involving companion animals is multidimensional, as is the link between animal abuse and human violence incorporating spousal abuse, child abuse, elder abuse and escalation into wider (i.e. non-domestic) forms of offending including serial killing. Bell identified that an increasing number of studies show that where adults are abusing animals they are also likely to be abusing their children.³⁴ But, in addition, children who are abusing animals are more likely also to be victims of abuse themselves and where children show aggression or exhibit sexualized behaviour towards animals this may also be an indicator

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of later abuse of other children or an escalation into violence against humans.³⁵

Animal abuse within families, particularly abuse that involves inflicting physical harm on animals, can thus be viewed as an indicator not only of domestic abuse perpetrated on partners and children typically by the adult male in the family, but also of psychological disorders that may show a propensity towards other forms of violence and antisocial behaviour. Animal harm thus needs to be recognized not just as a factor in domestic abuse but as a form of abuse in its own right and as an indicator of antisocial behaviour or violent tendencies in both adults and children that may be associated with other forms of offending.³⁶ If recognized early in children, assessing the precise nature of childhood animal abuse may be an important factor in diverting children away from future offending³⁷ or determining the correct approach to deal with abusive relationships within the family. If recognized in adults and considered within justice systems and social policy as more than just an animal welfare or animal law issue, i.e. as a criminal act perpetrated on a vulnerable sentient being and as part of a continuum of offending, animal abuse can be an important indicator of serious anti-social or violent criminal tendencies. It is time for the link between animal abuse and interpersonal violence to be recognized and acted upon.

³¹Browne (n 10); Ascione et al. (n 21)

³²Morley and Mullender (n.18)

³³Ascione et al. (n 21)

³⁴Lorna Bell, 'Abusing children - abusing animals' (2001) *Journal of Social Work* 1(2)

³⁵Elizabeth DeViney, Jeffery Dickert and Randall Lockwood, 'The Care of Pets within Child Abusing Families' (1983) *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems* 4; Gary Duffield, Angela Hassiotis and Eileen Vizard, (1998) 'Zoophilia in Young Sexual Abusers' (1998) *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry* 9(2); Linzey (n 5)

³⁶Nurse (n 14)

³⁷J.S. Hutton, 'Animal Abuse as a Diagnostic Approach in Social Work: A Pilot Study' in Randall Lockwood and Frank Ascione (eds). *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application* (Purdue University Press 1998)