Addressing Nonhuman Animal Abuse in Context

Clifton Flynn


I have long been an admirer of Clifton Flynn’s work on the association between interpersonal violence and nonhuman animal cruelty. He was one of the first authors I cited when I began to explore the empirical evidence for an association between animal cruelty and other types of violence, in particular, interpersonal violence.

In his book, *Understanding Animal Abuse: A Sociological Analysis*, he summarizes his research on this topic, as well as the research of many others in the field, offering a sociological analysis for understanding animal abuse. For the most part, Flynn cites research conducted by those who implicitly endorse the definition of animal abuse offered by Ascione (1993), which is “socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal” (p. 228). Like Beirne (2004), he urges an examination of the connection between institutionalized violence against animals (e.g., slaughterhouse activities, hunting, and other “socially accepted” behaviors) and criminality and social deviance. Moreover, a definition of animal abuse under many of the state laws in the United States may include unintentional abuse, for example, not providing necessary shelter, food, or veterinary care. Linzey (2009) and other researchers in Europe endorse the idea of including unintentional, as well as intentional, acts in a definition of animal cruelty.

When addressing the field of animal abuse, both theoretical and empirical foundations are needed. Flynn uses a sociological approach to understanding animal abuse. In addition to sociology, there are other fields that also offer...
important perspectives, including psychology, public health, economics, and criminal justice. In general, drawing from the diverse and multi-disciplinary field of violence prevention research would provide the most solid foundation for approaching the area of animal abuse.

The reasons for doing so are practical and conceptual. In discussing why violence toward animals has been ignored, Flynn (2012) notes that “... other issues are seen as more important and are thus given higher priority by researchers” (p. 3). This is sadly accurate. When it comes to studying animal cruelty, national samples are in short supply. Randomized studies, control groups, the use of large Ns, the collection of longitudinal data, and studies using multiple data points are in short supply as well.

Flynn cites a notable exception to this deficiency—the Vaughn (2009) study, which found a strong association between committing acts of animal cruelty and engaging in other deviant acts—describing the study as “... the only known study to examine adults’ animal cruelty using a national, representative sample” (Flynn, 2012, p. 6). This study, and others conducted by Vaughn and his colleagues, are impressive in their capacity to use large databases.

There are other large databases that could be mined for information on animal cruelty as well. For example, one of the studies that was used to identify factors associated with the early expression of disruptive and delinquent behaviors was The Pittsburgh Study, which began in 1987 and is funded by the Department of Justice. Subjects who participated in the study were “at risk.” Self-reports, parent and teacher reports, as well as school, medical, and criminal records were examined over a course of decades. The Pittsburgh Study included a question on animal cruelty, and the results indicated that physical aggression toward people and animals (one of the criterion for a diagnosis of conduct disorder) was one of four factors associated with the persistence of violent and anti-social behaviors (Loeber, Farrington, & Petechuck, 2003).

Another national and highly respected dataset on crime, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), may have useful information on the prevalence of animal cruelty. There is one item under the Household Respondent’s Vandalism Screen Questions about harm to animals that could be analyzed, after making adjustments for the weighting system.

In addition to the practical benefit of having access to more, and larger, databases to study animal cruelty within the larger multi-disciplinary field of violence prevention, there also is a conceptual advantage. There has been a strong association between acts of animal cruelty and other types of violence, especially interpersonal violence, as well as between early onset recurrent animal cruelty and anti-social and violent behaviors (Ascione, 2001; Ascione et al., 2007; Dadds, Whiting, & Hall, 2006; Henderson, Hensley, & Tallichet, 2011;