Untangling the Animal Abuse Web

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Academics like to erect walls. The walls do an excellent job of dividing things into neat categories: child abuse on this side of the wall, domestic violence on that side, another wall for the cruelty to animals section over there. The problem with all the walls is that they start to block our view, preventing access to each other’s tools and methods.

In my experience as a domestic violence hotline counselor, animal shelter staff member, community mediator, advocate for abused children, and organizer and facilitator of several alternatives to violence programs for prison inmates, drug users, and inner-city youth, the landscape of violence begins to look familiar. Yet the literature, language, and research methodology of each “type” of violence look surprisingly different, despite the gradual realization over the last two decades that the strands in the “tangled web of violence” are worth more attention than they’ve previously received.

In the sphere of cruelty to animals, those on the front lines of investigation and direct service seem to be several big leaps ahead of the academics. While cities around the country organize conferences to discuss cross-training for the staff of child protective services agencies, law enforcement agencies, women’s shelters, and animal welfare organizations, researchers continue to debate whether childhood acts of cruelty have any association with future violence toward humans (Felthous, 1980; Felthous & Kellert, 1987a, 1987b; Kellert & Felthous, 1985; Langevin, Paitich, Orchard, Hardy, & Russon, 1983; Ascione, 1993; Miller & Knutson, 1997).

Comparing what has been written about cruelty to animals with what has been written about domestic violence and child abuse, the first major difference is the sheer quantity of research. Sociofile, an electronic social science abstract index, lists 1,674 articles related to the keywords “child abuse,” but only six under “animal abuse” and five under “cruelty to animals.” Other library searches confirm how little attention has been paid to violence toward animals. Given the nascent stage of research, those researching animal abuse have a rich source of tools and insights to borrow: centuries of research and writing about violence toward humans. I will explore a few major themes, considering where we are and directions that future research might take.
Exploring the Complexity

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) created a graphic “Power and Control” wheel that is widely used in the educational efforts of domestic violence prevention advocates around the country. The wheel divides abuse into nine categories, each with several examples: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, using children, threats, using male privilege, intimidation, and isolation. While this typology’s categories, like most, may be simplistic (Vermeulen & Odendaal, 1993), the wheel is a effective way to demonstrate the connections between different behaviors that some abusers use, all related to the words “Power and Control” at the wheel’s hub (DAIP, 1991). A woman who has been the victim of domestic violence is often able to categorize the beatings she received as abuse, but surprised and empowered to rethink her partner’s other behaviors as possibly also abusive: taking her money and making her ask for an allowance, threatening to take her children away, or making all the “big” decisions himself. The wheel is, effectively, a handle, a way to grapple cognitively with a complex social issue.

Similarly, child abuse theorists have created intricate “maps” of the interacting influences that affect the quality of parenting. One includes such considerations as parent psychiatric factors (substance abuse, self-concept, etc.), child characteristics (temperament, age, gender, etc.), social factors (income, support networks, church, etc.), sociocultural values, parental developmental history, and other short- and long-term factors to demonstrate the complex intersections of the issues involved (Biller & Solomon, 1986).

Despite the groundwork laid by researchers of other kinds of violence, those theorizing cruelty to animals – at least from an academic standpoint – seem to thus far lack a similar typology of the issue. Vermeulen and Odendaal propose a broad typology of companion animal abuse that offers a starting point for continued work and addresses the need for increased complexity that they recognize (1993). Previous attempts to break down animal abuse into approachable segments include abuser type: ritualistic abuse, neglect, torturers, adolescents, and animal collectors (Lockwood, 1995); abuse type: a list of 17 acts including “throwing an animal off a high place,” “tying two animals’ tails together,” and “pouring chemical irritants on an animal” (Kellert & Felthous, 1985); direct motivation for abuse: a list of nine including “to control an animal,” “to retaliate against an animal,” and “to satisfy a prejudice against a species or breed” (Kellert & Felthous, 1985); and indirect reasons adolescents abuse: a list of four, including feelings of helplessness, imitating family violence, and never having learned to value the lives of others (Lockwood and Hodge, 1986).