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The Psychology of Animal Cruelty: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

As guest editors for Psychology, Crime, and Law, it is with great pleasure that we present this Special Issue, “The Psychology of Animal Cruelty”. In this introductory article, we offer broad insights into what we think to be the importance of studying this type of offending behavior. This forms the basis and justification for putting together this compilation of research, which spans three continents, that is diverse in theory application, method and research design. We provide brief synopses for the articles included in this issue. These articles cover the social and psychological factors related to child and adult perpetrators, offence heterogeneity (e.g., varying levels of abuse severity), victim characteristics, amongst other features of animal cruelty. We also offer a commentary on where the research can go next, identifying specific gaps in the existing literature. We conclude that there is an abundance of extant, related research that we can draw upon to inform future studies (e.g., implicit theories, scripts/schemas, dynamic risk factors) and clinical practice.

The Psychology of Animal Cruelty: An Introduction to the Special Issue

Cruelty towards animals is not a new phenomenon, yet we are limited in our understanding of its predictors and sequelae. There is, however, growing concern of whether our efforts to deter this behavior and rehabilitate these types of offenders are effective. For example, part of the concern stems from evidence that animal abusers are likely to have past convictions for other types of offences and, oftentimes, have gone on to commit a variety of offences post-conviction (Cuthbertson & Spencer, 2017). So, although the question of cause and effect remains unresolved, it is certainly clear that people who perpetrate animal abuse are cause for concern for the wider society because they are likely to engage in other crimes such as property damage, theft, and even interpersonal violence. Therefore, we wanted to put together a collection of papers that advanced our knowledge on issues regarding theory, offence heterogeneity, along with the psychological features of this offending behavior. As such, and with great delight, we introduce this Special Issue in Psychology, Crime and Law on animal cruelty.

Here, we provide an introduction to inform readers of what they can expect from this issue. We will start by offering a definition for animal cruelty to be clear on what we mean. We follow this with brief synopses of the articles contained within this Special Issue with the intention to generate epistemological debate and discussion on where we, as part of the human-animal relations discipline, can go from here.

Animal Cruelty Defined

We consider animal cruelty to be “all socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering or distress and/or death to an animal” (Ascione, 1993, p.83). This broad definition captures various types of abuse including active, physical abuse, as well as more passive forms, such as neglect. It is important to account for these variations in research to better understand the range and scope of the different

motivations, offence characteristics, and other features associated with animal abuse. For example, some of the studies included in this Special Issue look at child perpetrators, and others focus on adult perpetrators. These cross-sectional studies at different age groups may not give us definitive understanding of the cause and effect relationship between animal abuse and other offending, but at least they give us insight into how we can work with people at all ages. Also, to capture offence heterogeneity, this Special Issue contains studies employing a variety of self-report methods (i.e., self-reported behavior measures, attitudinal proxies, and proclivity measures). Although self-report may present issues with impression management, it is the ideal method to capture participants' self-appraisals and perceptions. This is particularly important given the sensitive nature of the items (Chan, 2009). Also, given the low conviction rates (e.g., in the UK, 3% of prosecutions result in convictions; RSPCA, 2013), we need to employ more of these community-based studies and methods, if we want to generate a fuller understanding of this behaviour which includes those who may be undetected/unapprehended for the abuse.

The Psychology of Animal Cruelty: The Highlights

This Special Issue opens with a theoretical application of a social cognitive model. In this paper, Henry (2017) presents Crick and Dodge's (1994) Social Information Processing (SIP) model and how it has been used (and tested) to explain aggressive behavior more generally, and interpersonal aggression more specifically. Given what we know regarding the application of the SIP model to human-human aggression, Henry (2017) offers an examination of existing animal abuse literature in light of these social-cognitive mechanisms. He concludes that the SIP model provides an organizational framework for interpreting what we currently know about animal abuse, but also provides a framework for future research based on the role of schemas and normative beliefs facilitating and reinforcing animal abuse.

Next, Walters (2017) presents an American study that extends our understanding of the methodological rigor of using self-reports and others' reports when assessing child perpetration of animal abuse and general delinquency. By comparing child and parent reports, he found parental reports of their children's perpetration of animal abuse to be significantly more indicative of child delinquency when compared to the children's self reports. At minimum, Walters' (2017) findings indicate that parental reports of delinquency and animal abuse are far more consistent than children's reports. But this study also offers some validation for the use of parental reports in diagnostic frameworks (e.g., DSM 5's conduct disorder). Moreover, this study is one of only a few that have begun to assess the validity of self-report measures of animal cruelty. As the study of animal cruelty progresses, the question of the reliability and validity of our measurement instruments becomes paramount.

The third paper by Hensley and colleagues (2017) tackles one of the longest standing theoretical propositions in the animal abuse literature, the violence graduation hypothesis. But this paper's unique and substantive contribution is that it examines some of the psychosocial factors that presumably mediate the relationship between childhood animal abuse and adult human violence. Hensley et al. (2017) employed a retrospective design, whereby US prison inmates self-reported on age of onset, frequency of animal abuse, social and psychological characteristics of the abuse, and interpersonal violence perpetration. Over and above other psychosocial factors (i.e., feeling upset for perpetrating animal abuse, age of onset, etc.), recurrent animal cruelty during adolescence was the only significant predictor of having committed recurrent interpersonal violence during adulthood. This study opens the door for future research to examine the predictive value of type and frequency of childhood animal cruelty on problematic behavior during adulthood.

In the fourth instalment, Newberry (2017) sheds light on the relationships between motivations for the abuse, method of the abuse, and facets of impulsivity. Using an

undergraduate sample at a UK university, Newberry's findings highlighted specific links between method of and motivations for animal abuse; links yet to be explicitly addressed in relation to offender assessment and treatment. She also highlights the importance of understanding which specific facets of impulsivity underpin the different motivations/methods of animal abuse in planning appropriate rehabilitation strategies.

Signal, Taylor, and Maclean (2017) explore the moderating effects of animal type on the empathy-animal attitudes relationship in the fifth paper of this issue. Utilizing a large, community-based sample in Australia, this study extends our current knowledge of the relationship between interpersonal empathy and empathy toward animals. Specifically, Signal et al. (2017) found that the relationship between these two forms of empathy was strongest when the animal under consideration was a pet rather than an animal perceived as a pest or an animal treated as a resource (e.g., livestock).

The sixth paper of the issue by Parfitt and Alleyne (2017) explores the psychological factors associated with animal abuse at varying levels of severity (i.e., neglect versus physical violence). Employing proclivity methodology, they collected data from an undergraduate population at another UK university. Parfitt and Alleyne (2017) found some individual-level variables (i.e., low extraversion, anger regulation) and antisocial behavior to be related to animal abuse proclivity across levels of severity. But low neuroticism was uniquely related to less severe forms (i.e., neglect) of animal abuse proclivity. They conclude that many types of animal abuse share psychological underpinnings, however, there is some evidence to suggest aspects of temperament and emotion regulation to be indicative of the severity of the likely abuse.

Last, but not least, Sanders and Henry (2017) examined how animal abuse relates to specific types of other antisocial behavior, namely bullying (traditional and cyber), as well as normative beliefs about aggression. Also using an American undergraduate sample, they

found that individuals who perpetrate any form of bullying (in-person and/or cyber) are significantly more likely to perpetrate animal abuse. They argue that this implies a generalized antisocial tendency. This proposition is further substantiated by the predictive value of normative beliefs of aggression reducing when bullying behavior was added to the aggression model, suggesting a mediation effect. This may be indicative of the underlying scripts, or implicit theories that normalize these antisocial and aggressive tendencies as suggested earlier by Henry (2017).

This compilation of papers addresses several gaps in the literature regarding psychological theory, method, and clinical applications. There is also a uniquely international character of this Special Issue, given that the research contained within spans three continents. Moreover, these studies utilize samples representing a range of populations, including incarcerated offenders, university students, children, and participants drawn from the general community. However, as intended, this Special issue is a contribution to an ongoing dialogue, rather than a collection of complete answers to the many outstanding questions.

Animal Cruelty Research: Looking to the Future

One of the underlying motivations for compiling this Special Issue was to encourage discussions and debates on what should be next on the agenda for animal abuse research. The papers in this issue cover a diverse range of topics advancing theory, methodology, and practice, and yet, we need this momentum to not only be sustained but also, boosted. With increasingly rigorous and innovative research designs, we would be remiss not to offer a commentary on the avenues for future research. This is not an exhaustive forecasting, but a broad research agenda.

Henry's (2017) theoretical contribution highlights a gap in the current animal abuse literature on the underlying cognitive structures and processes that might explain why

someone resorts to harming animals over and above other types of offending behavior. The schemas (defined as abstract representations of concepts [for example, objects or places] consisting of their typical attributes and characteristics; Fiske & Linville, 1980) and scripts (defined as the cognitive rules that bias how we interpret and evaluate social information, which also impacts on our decision-making; Tomkins, 1991) that we learn from our experiences shape how we perceive the world. They bias our perceptions of social interactions because they contain assumptions of how others will react to us in a given situation (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006). If we examine other types of offending, we see that sex offenders learn distorted scripts about sex and sexual relationships (i.e., Ward & Siegert, 2002), aggressive/violent offenders learn scripts that prime them to behave aggressively even in benign situations (i.e., Huesmann, 1988), and even more specialist offenders such as firesetters learn scripts that distort the utility and dangerousness of fire (i.e., Butler & Gannon, 2015). So are there unique scripts (or implicit theories), learned from childhood experiences with animals perhaps, which explain why a person will harm an animal? For example, in the child sexual abuse literature, some abusers believe that the world is a dangerous place and within this belief children are perceived as threats that need to be 'taught a lesson' (see Ward & Kennan, 1999). The same (or similar) can be assumed in instances of animal abuse. Perhaps abusers think that when an animal engages in undesirable behavior (e.g., urinating inside the house) they are doing this on purpose and are, thus, deserving of punishment. Other distorted beliefs could be: animals as objects – animals do not feel and think like people so no harm is actually being caused; or even, entitlement – animals are inferior to people and it is a person's right to assert their dominance over them. These scripts have yet to be rigorously conceptualized, but there are certainly extant literatures to draw upon to theorize and design studies to test for them.

The jury is still out regarding the ‘chicken and the egg’ conundrum – that is, whether animal cruelty precedes or follows interpersonal violence. As addressed in Hensley and colleagues’ (2017) article, the longstanding violence graduation hypothesis has assumed that childhood animal cruelty is a precursor to adult interpersonal violence. However, Walters’ (2013, 2014) past findings show a lack of specificity. That is, childhood animal cruelty predicts general offending, not necessarily violent offending. So where does this leave us? There appears to be a clear relationship between animal abuse perpetration and various types of other offending. It is not wholly clear what the actual pathway is and perhaps it is too complex to conceptualize. But research questions that come to mind are:

1. For children who perpetrate animal abuse, what determines the type of future offending (i.e., acquisitive crimes versus violent crimes)?
2. Does childhood animal abuse predict adult animal abuse? Admittedly, a tautological question, but the literature appears to be focussed on a graduation or escalation of sorts, rather than the process of sustaining or maintaining this behavior. If childhood animal abuse does predict adult animal abuse, what are the mechanisms that contribute to this continuity?
3. Also, is there a difference between early-onset and late-onset animal abuse offending? We tend to focus on those who perpetrate animal abuse during childhood in order to determine the consequences of those experiences. But what about adults who perpetrate animal abuse, either for the first time or with a history of childhood perpetration? We still need to learn what determines how prolific (and/or violent) they could be if we know when and how often they engage in animal abuse.
4. Finally, yet importantly, scholars in this field will need to assess the psychometric characteristics of our measures of animal cruelty. Thus far, little is known regarding

the stability of self-reports of animal cruelty over time, or of the convergent or discriminant validity of these measures.

The underlying motive for this proposed research agenda is to understand how we can reduce this type of offending. There are clear opportunities for prevention and intervention strategies for children and adults but what is lacking is the evidence base to inform these strategies. The 'What Works' literature offers, in many ways, a manual on what to investigate next (see Maguire, 2013). More research needs to focus on identifying the dynamic risk factors that distinguish animal abusers and also, the factors that they share with other types of offending. So, pro-criminal attitudes, beliefs, and scripts that explain why people offend, are also the criminogenic needs that, as practitioners, we can target and make meaningful changes.

Ultimately, we hope that in reading the articles contained within this Special Issue you are left with more questions than answers, and a new found energy to investigate and innovate within the human-animal relations literature. The welfare of animals is of great concern to us because the victims are voiceless and, thus, defenceless. But with greater understanding of 'what works' with animal abuse offenders comes opportunities to develop effective evidence-based practice.

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