

Link between animal cruelty and human abuse:

A review of the literature

By Regan Jules-Macquet

Animal abuse has become increasingly recognised as a serious crime, as well as an indicator of human-directed violence (A Campbell 'The Admissibility of Evidence of Animal Abuse in Criminal Trials for Child and Domestic Abuse' (2002) 43(2) *Boston College Law Review* 463).

Recently there have been a few cases of judicial responses to animal cruelty and abuse in the South African media. Public sentiment often runs very high over cases involving animals. A story that was discussed on social media refers to a magistrate who allegedly stated that people care more for animals than for humans when passing a light sentence for dog fighting.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of the literature on the link between animal cruelty and criminal behaviour, illustrating that dealing appropriately with animal cruelty offences is a necessary part of addressing problem human behaviour. It is a specious argument that one must care either for humans or for animals, but not for both. As the literature in this article will show, the fates of both humans and animals are inextricably intertwined, and that this understanding should inform investigative, judicial and prosecutorial responses to such offences.

Legislation

Animal mistreatment is dealt with in terms of the Animals Protection Act 71 of 1962 (the Act). People found guilty of contravening the Act are liable on conviction to a fine or incarceration for a maximum of 12 months. Civil orders for damages up to R 5 000 can also be made in terms of the Act. The Act specifies the various actions that constitute animal abuse and mistreatment, which range from the causing of pain, injury or suffering of an animal, to dog fighting and keeping an animal in unsuitable conditions without adequate medical care, water, light and food.

The links between human behaviour and animal cruelty and abuse

A strong connection exists between animal mistreatment and human violence (C Hensley and SE Tallichet 'Childhood and Adolescent Animal Cruelty Methods and Their Possible Link to Adult Violent Crimes' (2009) 24 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 147 and F Ortiz 'Making The Dogman Heel: Recommendations For Improving The Effectiveness Of Dogfighting Laws' (2010) 3 *Stanford Journal of Animal Law and Policy* 1). The presence of abusive behaviour towards animals is a characteristic of one in four violent adult offenders (FR Ascione 'Animal Abuse and Youth Violence' (2001) *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* at 1). People who commit a single known act of animal abuse are more likely to commit other criminal offences than non-abusers. Animal abusers are 5,3 times more likely to have a violent criminal record than non-abusers (A Arluke, J Levin, and F Ascione 'The Relationship of Animal Abuse to Violence and Other Forms of Antisocial Behaviour' (1999) 14 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 963).

Current evidence does show that animal mistreatment by youths is linked with general criminality, interpersonal violence and gang-related activities. Offenders in the United States who have been charged with animal abuse are more likely to carry and use firearms in the commission of other offences and commit acts of violence towards other humans (J Maher and H Pierpoint 'Friends, Status Symbols And Weapons: The Use of Dogs by Youth Groups and Youth Gangs' (2011) 55 *Crime, Law and Social Change* 405). Abuse of animals for fun by youths is a statistically significant predictor for interpersonal violence as adults. Other research into the link between animal abuse and human violence has shown that animal abusers are four times more likely to commit property offences and five times more likely to commit violent offences. According to Arluke, Levine and Ascione (*op cit*), animal abusers are more likely to commit other offences such

as drug-related offences, disorderly behaviour, property offences and other antisocial acts than people with no history of animal abuse.

Animal abuse appears in offences such as domestic violence, where pets of the victim can be injured or killed. There is a significant association between domestic violence and animal abuse to the extent that animal abuse is regarded as an indicator of potential domestic violence in the home (KL Thompson and E Gullone 'Promotion of Empathy and Prosocial Behaviour in Children through Human Education' (2003) 38(3) *Australian Psychologist* at 175, as well as Campbell *op cit*). In studies of women at a domestic violence shelter, 71% of women who owned pets reported that the pet had been a target of violence by the abuser. Thirty-three percent of women whose pets had been abused also reported that their children had been abused (Ascione *op cit*). A study on abused children indicated that 60% of the cases involved animal as well as child abuse, the figure escalating to 88% when child abuse was physical (D Atwood-Harvey 'From Touchstone to Tombstone: Children's Experiences with the Abuse of their Beloved Pets' (2007) 31 November *Humanity & Society* 379). According to Flynn, efforts to reduce animal mistreatment and cruelty are likely to reduce tolerance for interpersonal violence in communities, which, in turn, may reduce interpersonal violence against women and children (Thompson and Gullone, 2003 (*op cit*)).

Animal abuse not only inhibits the development of empathy and is more likely to lead to interpersonal violence; it also is strongly connected with attitudes, values and beliefs supporting interpersonal violence. This relationship exists for both sexes, although males are almost four times more likely to abuse animals than females (CP Flynn 'Animal Abuse in Childhood and Later Support for Interpersonal Violence in Families' (1999) 7(2) *Society and Animals* 161). Simply witnessing animal mistreatment and abuse at a young age increases the risk of not only perpetuating animal abuse oneself, but also engaging in delinquent behaviour (BC Henry 'Exposure to Animal Abuse and Group Context: Two Factors Affecting Participation in Animal Abuse' 2004 17(4) *Anthrozoos* 290 and KL Thompson and E Gullone 'An Investigation into the Association between the Witnessing of Animal Abuse and Adolescents' Behavior toward Animals' (2006) 14(3) *Society & Animals* 221). This effect is heightened when the animal abuse is perpetrated by someone with whom the witness has an emotional connection, such as a parent, sibling or peer (Thompson and Gullone (2006) *op cit*).

Accurately identifying and appropriately responding to animal abuse in young children not only allows for early interventions, but may also act as a predictor of long-term behavioural problems in individual cases (FR Ascione, ME Kaufmann and S Brooks 'Animal Abuse and Developmental Psychopathology: Recent Research, Programmatic, and Therapeutic Issues and Challenges for the Future' In: A FINE (ed) *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice* (United Kingdom: Academic Press 2000) 325). L Merz-Perez et al cautions against dismissing animal mistreatment and abuse as petty offences, and states that each act of violence towards an animal should be thoroughly investigated as a potential precursor of human violence (L Merz-Perez, KM Heide, and IJ Silverman 'Childhood Cruelty to Animals and Subsequent Violence against Humans' (2001) 45 *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 556).

In addition to perpetrators of animal abuse, passive bystanders or witnesses of animal abuse have been shown to demonstrate behaviours, values and beliefs similar to passive bystanders/witnesses of human violence (A Arluke 'Bystander Apathy in Animal Abuse Cases: Exploring Barriers to Child and Adolescent Intervention' (2012) 25(1) *Anthrozoös* 5). By addressing and preventing passivity towards animal mistreatment and abuse, improvements can also be made in preventing passivity towards human violence, particularly with children.

Profile of an offender

For illustrative purposes, a brief case study of an offender who committed animal abuse has been included. Offender X is a 38-year-old male from the Eastern Cape, who was convicted for bestiality. A brief review of his personal circumstances reveals the following:

- Disrupted family structure through the death of both parents while young.
- Poor psychosocial development as he has never had an intimate relationship with a woman.
- Still lives with his sisters, failed to complete his education and does not work.
- History of asocial behaviour in the form of three prior convictions for substance abuse and two prior incidents of inappropriate sexual contact, one of which was incestual.
- A history of substance abuse of dagga and alcohol.
- Distorted cognition illustrated in the fact that he believes the neighbourhood women use witchcraft against him as the reason why he does not have any intimate relations with adult women.

The assessment outcome was to refer the offender for a full psychiatric evaluation and for cognitive behavioural therapy, coupled with family therapy and aftercare. The above case depicts the complex presence of multiple risk factors that warrant close and careful attention in a single case of animal abuse. This case illustrates the links between animal abuse and offending behaviour that has been repeatedly identified in research literature.

Prosecuting animal cruelty and abuse

Campbell recommends the evidentiary use of acts of animal mistreatment and abuse in cases that include child abuse and domestic violence on the grounds that it may be easier to detect and prove and can serve to illustrate lack of accident, intent or motive (A Campbell *op cit*). The connection between animal abuse/mistreatment and child abuse and domestic violence should receive more attention by detectives, prosecutors and judicial officers. According to Campbell, focusing on evidence of animal abuse or mistreatment can help reduce animal abuse, child abuse and domestic violence (A Campbell *op cit*).

Suggestions

In the event that a case of animal abuse or mistreatment occurs, it is suggested that the accused be referred for a psychosocial assessment by either the Department of Social Development, or by a civil society service provider, such as the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO). This is to ensure that any underlying social functioning and psychosocial issues are correctly identified and taken into consideration when developing the diversion order or sentence. Family assessments will be required in the event that child abuse or domestic violence is suspected.

Implications for policy and practice

It is hoped that this article has demonstrated the significance of animal abuse and mistreatment in the field of criminal justice. Animal abuse should be prioritised for its own sake in order that we work towards the creation of a non-violent society. Unfortunately there are many people who regard animal welfare matters as of secondary importance relative to human welfare, as petty or trivial acts not requiring serious attention. This article hopes to improve the general understanding of the extent which human and animal welfare issues overlap and are inextricably intertwined.

The research briefly reviewed above indicates that there is a need in South Africa to pay more attention to animal welfare issues as part of broader social justice and crime prevention initiatives. In particular, police, prosecution and judicial officers would benefit from education and training on the aetiology and dynamics of animal abuse and mistreatment and its relevance for human behaviour, particularly criminal behaviour. In addition, there must be better coordination between service providers such as NICRO, animal welfare organisations, the Department of Social Development, the police and prosecution in dealing with acts of animal abuse and mistreatment, child abuse and domestic violence (FR Ascione et al *op cit*). In addition, funders of crime prevention projects should begin to consider funding interventions that focus on animal welfare issues as well as general lifeskills as standard crime prevention initiatives.

Conclusion

This article provided a brief summary of the current literature on the linkages between animal abuse and mistreatment and human aggression and violence. It is important that South African criminal justice stakeholders become increasingly aware of the significance of animal abuse and its implications for criminal behaviour and crime prevention initiatives. It is hoped that future cases of animal abuse and mistreatment will receive more careful attention, as they deserve.

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