

Companion Animals as Scapegoats, Property, and Victims of Abuse in Violent Families

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Abstract -- This study surveyed victims residing at domestic violence shelters and members of the pet-owning general public visiting veterinarian offices to examine the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of both pet abusers and non-abusers with regard to companion animals. The study was conducted to determine whether pet abusers differed from non-abusers in terms of their perceptions of companion animals as sentient beings vs. property, and their tendencies to "scapegoat" the family pet for personal and/or family problems.

Key words: Pet abuse, domestic violence, attitudes, perceptions, scapegoat, sentient beings

The study of companion animal victims of family violence has become a well-researched area. Likewise, there is a growing body of findings concerning the general public's attitudes and beliefs about pets (Kellert 1980; Katcher and Beck 1983; Carmack 1985; Voith 1985; Kidd and Kidd 1987; Bryant 1990; Siegel 1993; Schenk, Templer, Peters, and Schmidt 1994; Albert and Bulcroft 1998; Anon 2000). Despite the rich findings in these arenas however, there remains a shortage of research seeking to uncover the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of pet owner-guardians residing within violent households—particularly those who abuse the family pet—and comparing these factors to pet owner-guardians in the general population. Such inquiry is important as it could provide new insights about why animals are abused as well as the potential to recognize additional factors that may place companion animals at risk. A recent study has examined the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of animal abusers by comparing domestic violence batterers who abuse the family pet to those batterers who abuse only human family members (Carlisle-Frank, Frank, and Nielsen, 2004). The present study has examined the differences in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of animal abusers to non-abusers, sampling both domestic violence family members and the pet-owning general population.

Pets as Sentient Beings versus Pets as Property

An important factor that may set pet abusers apart from non-abusers is their tendency to perceive their pets as property rather than sentient beings. Researchers have argued that animals lose in violent families precisely because they are often viewed as "property" (Vermeulen and Odendaal 1993; Adams, 1995; LaCroix 1998). Additionally, a lack of empathy, the belief that animals do not experience pain, and the perception that animals are "property" have previously been hypothesized as key features associated with animal abuse (Agnew 1998; Herzog and Borghardt 1988; Flynn 2000).

Previous studies have found that the majority of people who have pets view them as members of the family rather than as property (Kellert 1980; Hutton 1983; Katcher and Beck 1983; Carmack 1985; Voith 1985; Albert and Bulcroft 1988; Sanders 1993; Siegel 1993; Anon 2000). It is possible that this tendency stems from the owner-guardians' appreciation that their pets *are* sentient beings with feelings and preferences--an appreciation that may have a tendency to be absent in the perpetrators of family violence (Carlisle-Frank, Frank, and Nielsen 2004).

If the belief that animals are sentient beings is transformed in to action this may play out in treating one's pets similar to the way other family members are treated. It appears that the majority of animal caregivers are indeed treating their pets as though they recognize that their companion animals are sentient beings. For instance, the results of one study of random pet owners in the U.S. indicated that 95% of dog owners and 91% of cat owners pet and hug their companion animals daily. This same national study of U.S. pet owners found that the majority of dog owners and cat owners play with their pets daily, and that 45% of dog owners and 16% of cat owners take their companion animals along with them on family vacations (Anon 2000).

Yet another finding supporting the hypothesis that pet owner-guardians tend to perceive their pets as sentient beings is that the majority of families with companion animals celebrate their pets' birthdays (Anon 1995; Anon 2000). Likewise, most people reported that the family pet was

allowed to live indoors with the family and most reported that their pets' names appeared along with the other family members on greeting cards (Anon 1995). And, finally, another potential indicator of people perceiving their pets as sentient beings rather than property is the tendency to take and preserve photos of the pets in the family photo album. Previous research has demonstrated that the family photo album provides powerful insights about family relationships--including those relationships with the family pet (Entin 1983; Ruby 1982).

Hypothesizing that the above mentioned factors may be indicators of whether people perceived their pets as sentient beings or as property, the present study examined these factors in order to determine whether there existed any significant differences between abusers and non-abusers in the way they perceive and treat the family pet.

The Family Pet as Scapegoat

DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983) found that some family violence against animals may be a function of scapegoating of innocent, powerless victims. Previous research has also indicated that family pets--especially those residing in angry and aggressive households such as those families with ongoing domestic violence--are often made the scapegoat for family and personal problems (Kellert and Felthous 1985; Veivers 1985; Lockwood and Hodge 1986; Vermeulen and Odendaal 1993; Adams 1994; Agnew 1998; Flynn 1999; 2000; Carlisle-Frank, Frank, and Nielsen 2004). These findings support the results cited by researchers who found considerable variation in the ways parents treated companion animals, with volatile, angry families tending to use their animals as scapegoats (Zahn-Waxler, Hollenbeck, and Radke-Yarrow 1984). Given these findings, another goal of the present study was to determine whether pet abusers had a higher tendency to scapegoat the family pet than non-abusers.

Methods

The present study sought to expand the body of existing queries about the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of those people who abuse their companion animals. It was hypothesized that pet abusers may tend to differ from non-abusers in some important ways--namely, in their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors with regard to their pets. More specifically, the present study sought to uncover potential differences between abusers and non-abusers in terms of perceiving companion animals as sentient beings versus property, and having a tendency to scapegoat the family pet for family and personal problems.

The present study entailed surveying domestic violence victims and a group comprised of members of the general pet-owning public visiting veterinarians' offices about their and their partners' attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors with regard to their companion animals and in the cases involving violence, about the specifics surrounding their partners' abusive behaviors directed toward the family pet.

Assessing abusers' attitudes, beliefs, and actions from the victim's perspective was the primary approach of the present study. This approach was taken for a couple of reasons. Firstly, obtaining a large enough pool of abusers willing to participate in this study was implausible. Secondly, even if gathering such a pool of participants were possible, their responses would likely be unreliable. Researchers have found that partners in domestic violence families may not agree about the levels of different forms of violence the batterer perpetuates. In their sample of batterers who had undergone intervention, Edleson and Brygger (1986) found that at time of intake victims' and batterers' exact agreement was only 24% when asked about the batterer's violence and/or threats against pets.

Given that there may be a tendency for disagreement about the specifics surrounding treatment of the family pet, especially in cases of pet abuse, it begs the question: Is the victim or the batterer the better respondent? There is reason to believe that self-disclosure bias and social desirability precludes any ability to obtain accurate reports regarding attitudes and actions surrounding pet abuse from batterers themselves. Adams (1995) has argued that batterers do not disclose the harm they do to animals because by acknowledging they have harmed animals batterers must admit that their abuse of animals was a conscious, deliberate, and planned act. Offering further support, an empirical assessment of intake statistics of batterers brought forth this final conclusion: most batterers simply do not admit to pet abuse (Arkow 1994b). Such findings support the surveying of victims rather than abusers in the present study.

For the purpose of this study animal abuse was defined as socially unacceptable, deliberate and unnecessary suffering and harm inflicted on animals.

Questionnaire

The survey was comprised of 78 questions including three free-response essay questions. The survey questions discussed throughout this paper were forced-choice with the number of possible choices and "not applicable" options varying according to the type of information being sought. Some of the survey questions were worded such that participants were asked to respond about their own personal beliefs and actions, other questions asked specifically about the partners' beliefs and actions, and other questions asked about both respondents and partners. Those respondents who did not have partners had a choice to respond "no partner" and were omitted from analysis; all of the victims group respondents had partners.

In addition to analyzing the individual questions, there were fourteen scaled questions that comprised the Sentient Beings Scale. Questions focused on (a) the frequency with which pet-abusers show affection toward pets and tell pets they love them; (b) whether they refer to themselves as the pets' mom or dad; (c) who participates in caring for and playing with pets; (d)

how they communicate with pets (commands/threats/conversationally); (e) whether pets' birthdays were celebrated; (f) whether pets were in the family will; (g) whether pets joined other family members on vacations or family outings (walks, trips to the park, picnics, drives, etc); (h) whether pets are considered as full-fledged family members; (i) whether pets live indoors with family but are not considered full-fledged family members, or whether pet is viewed as property; (j) whether pets received gifts for holidays and birthdays; (k) whether pets appeared frequently in the family photo album; (l) the number of toys pets have; (m) whether pets' names appear on family greeting cards; and (n) where pets live the majority of the time.

Procedure

A written survey was used for data collection in order to reduce potential problems associated with the sensitive subject matter. Surveys were distributed to domestic violence shelters and veterinarian clinics in the upstate New York region of the United States. Managers and staff members were instructed to place the questionnaires in a prominent place and to advise those making inquiries that participation was voluntary and that those interested should complete the surveys anonymously. The instruments included a cover sheet requesting participation in a study seeking to learn more about families and their pets and emphasizing that participation was voluntary and confidential. A security drop-box was provided at each location allowing respondents to deposit their completed surveys in a tamper-proof, secured box. Following the data collection period the security boxes of completed surveys were then retrieved. A total of 48 domestic violence victims and 52 pet-owning veterinarian clients from the general public participated.

Participants

Participants were assigned in to either of two groups, pet abusing (PA) and non-abusing (NPA), depending on how they responded to a question asking whether their partners had harmed the family pet within the previous 12 months. Participants came from a mixture of urban, suburban and rural regions. All of the respondents from the PA group were female. Eighty-one percent of respondents from the NPA group were female. Respondents from the PA group ranged in age from 21-41, with their partners' age ranging from 21-51. Respondents from the NPA group ranged in age from 20-72, with their partners ranging in age from 20-66. PA group respondents' ethnicity was comprised of 82.6% Caucasian, 13.1% Hispanic, 0% African American and 4.3% other ethnic make-up, with their partners being 63.6% Caucasian, 9.1% Hispanic and 27.3% African American, and 0% other. Respondents' ethnicity for the NPA group consisted of 77.4% Caucasian, 8.1% Hispanic and 11.3% African American, and 3.2% other, with their partners being 82.6% Caucasian, 2.2% Hispanic and 15.2% African American, and 0% other. When asked about their highest level of education attained, 31.4% of respondents from the PA group and 23.5% of their partners were reported as having a bachelor's degree. Forty-one percent of the respondents from the NPA group and 31.8% of their partners were reported as having a bachelor's degree or a graduate school education.

Analysis

The primary focus for analysis involved comparing the two groups' responses to categorical survey questions concerning their partners' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors toward the family pet. The responses for these questions were analyzed using a Chi-square test. The majority of the Chi-square tests were performed on the raw survey categories. (In a few cases cells were collapsed into larger categories to eliminate cells with too few observations.) Groups of conceptually similar questions were converted into a numerical value by first converting each

question into a binary value and then summing the scores for these questions. With this and other numerical data, the two-groups were compared using an unpaired t-test assuming equal variances (tests for equality of variances between t-test groups yielded no significant differences). Unless otherwise specified, the results for t-tests used two tails. Since most of the results involved simply comparing two groups, these statistical tests proved sufficient to cover the majority of analysis.

Results

All of the respondents used for analysis had companion animals. This resulted in 52 respondents from the pet-owning general public and 34 respondents from domestic violence shelters being used in the final results. Fifty-three percent of the victims' group respondents and 2.7% of the respondents from the general public reported physical abuse to the family pet (See Table 1). The two populations were pooled together and then assigned either PA or NPA group status depending on their report of whether their partners had committed pet abuse within the previous 12 months. This resulted in 63 members of the NPA group and 23 members in the PA group.

Perceiving the animal as a sentient being vs. viewing the pet as "property"

It was hypothesized that pet abusers would be more likely to perceive their pets as property and be less likely to acknowledge that their animal family members were sentient beings.

In order to assess attitudes, perceptions and behaviors that might indicate a tendency towards either viewing the family pet as a sentient being with feelings and preferences or as an object

(property), respondents were asked questions about how they and their partners interacted with the family pet.

When asked how often their partners told the pets that they loved them respondents indicated that NPA partners tend to more frequently tell their pets they love them than partners from the PA group. Forty-one percent of NPA tell their pets they love them "daily", while only 4.8% of PA do so. Pet abusers were reported more frequently to "never" or "hardly ever" tell their pets they love them (PA = 90.5%; NPA = 37%). The difference between these two groups was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 21.40$, $df=1$, $p < .0001$).

When asked how often their partners showed affection toward their pets, NPA were reported to show more affection than PA. Respondents reported that pet abusers "never" or "hardly ever" show affection toward their pets. Many more PA (81.8%) failed to show affection toward the family pet than NPA (15.2%). Furthermore, respondents reported that NPA show affection towards pets "daily" or "weekly". Respondents reported that far less pet abusers showed affection toward the family pet on a daily or weekly basis (NPA = 84.8%; PA = 18.2%). These results were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 30.04$, $df = 4$, $p < .0001$).

When asked who was more likely to take part in the daily care-taking of the family pet respondents reported that 54% of NPA were likely to take part in the daily care-taking and playing of the family pet, while only 13% of PA were reported to participate in the caring for or playing with the family pet. The difference between the non-abuser and abuser groups were highly significant with regard to this question ($\chi^2 = 12.79$, $df=1$, $p = .0003$).

Pet abusers and non-abusers were also reported to interact differently with their pets. Respondents reported pet abusers tend to talk to their pets primarily through "commands" or "threats" only (PA = 82.6%; NPA = 4.8%), while non-abusers were reported to most often talk to their pets "conversationally" (NPA = 95.2%; PA = 17.4%). The differences between the two

groups was highly significant in this area ($\chi^2 = 53.63$, $df = 1$, $p < .0001$) and thought to represent the differences in overall attitudes and perceptions about the pets between these two groups.

When respondents were asked whether their partners tended to refer to the family pet as property or as a full-fledged family member the majority of non-abusers were reported to refer to their pets as "full-fledged family members" (NPA = 84.1%; PA = 17.4%). This was not the case for pet abusers, however. Respondents from the pet abusing group most often reported that their partners referred to the family pets as "property" (PA = 60.9%; NPA = 4.8%). The results were again highly significant ($\chi^2 = 33.57$, $df = 1$, $p < .0001$). Additionally, pet abusers were reported to have attitudes highly consistent with viewing their pets as property--even when respondents reported their partners did not view them as property when asked the question directly. More specifically, when all of the items representing Sentient Beings were scaled, excluding the question asking whether partners thought the pet was a full family member or property, the remaining attitudes reported leaned toward pet abusers viewing pets as property. This held true even when respondents answered "no" when asked directly whether their partners viewed the pets as property. Results of these attitudes were significant ($t = -2.30$, $df = 57$, $p = 0.02$). And finally, respondents reported that pet abusers who believe their pets are sentient beings punished pets less often than abusers who reportedly believe their pets are property. Again, the results were highly significant ($t = -5.04$, $df = 22$, $p < .0001$).

According to respondents the majority of non-abusive families celebrate their pets' birthday. Pet abusers' families, however, were far less likely to do so. When given several choices of possible family members--including pets--and asked to check all that apply for whose birthday was celebrated, PA families were less likely to celebrate their pet's birthday while NPA families were more likely to celebrate their pets' birthday (NPA = 55.6%; PA = 8.7%); ($\chi^2 = 15.09$, $df = 1$, $p = .0001$).

Additionally, non-abusive families were reported to be much more likely to give gifts to their pets for their birthdays, while families with pet abuse tend to be much less likely to do so (NPA = 71.4%; PA = 17.4%) ; ($\chi^2 = 20.07$, $df = 1$, $p < .0001$).

When given choices of several family members--including pets-- and asked to check all that apply for who went along on family vacations or family outings such as picnics, walks, trips to the park, car rides, etc., families of non-abusers were reported to be just as likely to bring their pets along on family outings or vacations as to leave them behind (NPA = 47.6%). However, respondents reported that pet abusers and their families tended to be much less likely to bring their pets along on family outings or vacations (PA = 8.7%). The differences between these two groups was highly significant for this question ($\chi^2 = 12.75$, $df = 1$, $p = .0004$).

It was hypothesized that pet abusers might have a tendency to perceive their animals as objects or property and therefore would be less inclined to appreciate the animal's needs to be close to the other family members or to have preferences for comfort. As expected, according to respondents, non-abusing families were significantly more likely than pet abusers' families to permit their pets to reside in the "living area" of their house (living room; bedroom; free-range to roam throughout the house) (NPA = 92.1%; PA = 56.5%). Likewise, pet abusers' families were reported to be more likely to require pets to live outside (with or without shelter); garage; or a cordoned-off "pet area" separate from the rest of the family. This finding was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 17.44$, $df = 3$, $p = .0001$).

It was hypothesized that pet abusers would be less inclined to consider pets as members of the family worthy of having their names listed with the other family members on greeting cards. As expected, when given a choice of several family members including the family pet and asked to check all that apply for whose names typically appear as signatures on family greeting cards, respondents reported that pet abusing families tended not to include their pets' names on greeting cards while families of non-abusers were reported to be just as likely as not to include the pet's

name with other family members on greeting cards (NPA = 47.6%; PA = 8.7%). Again, the findings were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 12.75$, $df = 1$, $p = .0004$).

The final question in determining attitudes about whether pets were viewed as sentient beings and members of the family or perceived as objects/property concerned whether the pet was included in the family photo album. Using the family photo album as yet one more marker of the types of attitudes and relationships people have with their animals it was hypothesized that the pets would not be included in anything that symbolized or portrayed the "family" for pet abusers. As it turns out the non-abusing families who have family photo albums were far more likely to have their pets' picture in the family photo album (NPA = 79.4%). Families of pet abusers who keep family photo albums, on the other hand, were just as likely to exclude the pet's picture in the family photo album as include it (PA = 47.8%). The results for this question were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 8.13$, $df = 1$, $p = .0044$).

Independently these questions appear to support the hypothesis that pet abusers are indeed differentiated with regard to certain attitudes, perceptions and behaviors regarding the family pet. If, as it was hypothesized, these questions are indeed measuring something akin to perceptions of animals as sentient beings versus objects/property we would expect to see significant results when grouping these questions together in to a single scale. (All questions were converted in to binary variables with a value of "0" indicating a view more consistent with seeing pets as sentient beings. The questions were then summed to yield a single scale score.) Indeed this is what occurred; a t-test of the scaled questions appear to indicate that pet abusers tend to perceive their pets as property and are less likely to recognize them as sentient beings, while non-abusers tend to be more likely to perceive their pets as sentient beings and less likely to view them as property. The results were highly significant ($t = -7.60$, $df = 84$, $p < .0001$) with NPA having a mean score of 4.44 and PA having a mean score of 10.43.

Pets as Scapegoats

It was hypothesized that pet-abusing households would be more likely than non-abusing households to scapegoat pets for daily frustrations. More specifically, it was hypothesized that pet abusers might be more inclined than non-abusers to unfairly blame the animal for their feelings of frustration and anger. It was also hypothesized that PA would be more likely to take their frustrations out on the pets than would their NPA counterparts. This increase in frustrations, it was hypothesized, might take the form of more frequent punishments for the family pet.

The reports from respondents indicate that PA households tend to be far more likely than NPA households to use their pets as a scapegoat. When asked to choose from several family members, including the family pet, who, if anyone was a scapegoat for family or personal problems, the results indicating the level of differences between these two groups were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 15.57, df = 1, p < .0001$). There was a total of 29.2% of PA who reportedly scapegoat the family pet, while only 1.6% of the NPA were reported to do so.

Additionally, the results indicate that non-abusers tend to punish their pets less frequently than pet abusers. When respondents were asked about the frequency with which the family pets were punished the most common response for non-abusers was "never" or "hardly ever" (NPA = 95%; PA = 34.8%). The most common response for pet abusers for how often they punished their pets was "a few times a week" (PA = 56.5%; NPA = 3.3%). These results were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 36.07, df = 3, p < .0001$).

Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that violence directed toward animals appears to be correlated with a number of attitudes, perceptions and belief systems specifically directed at the family pet. Of course further research is needed to test these variables under a variety of conditions and settings to determine whether the findings in the present study are consistent and applicable to other regions and populations. It is possible that the regional culture of the area surveyed in the present study is unique enough as to prohibit applicability of the results to other communities. Additionally, the relatively small sample size and differences in educational levels between the pet abusing and non-abusing groups could also have affected the final results. Therefore, caution should be used until the findings have been further replicated when generalizing the results to other populations.

The number of animal victims of domestic violence who are abandoned at U.S. public shelters each year is estimated in the hundreds of thousands (Ascione, Weber, and Wood 1997). Couple this with untold numbers of animals killed at the hands of their family members and the problem is sobering. Once the findings of the present study can be shown to be generalized, identifying attitudinal, perceptual and behavioral trends and tendencies will not only increase our understanding of what drives perpetrators to abuse animals but may also provide a number of indicators for risk factors to alert those involved in identifying and stopping animal abuse. Such a composite may be especially useful when there exists evidence--or suspicions of evidence--of abuse or threats of abuse such as those that may surface for veterinarians (Arkow, 1994a; Munro and Thrusfield, 2001), law enforcement, humane educators and mental health service providers.

Table 1

Attitudes, Perceptions, Beliefs, and Treatment of the Family Pet: Pet Abusers vs. Non-Abusers	
•53% of victims group reported abuse to family pet in past 12 months	•2.7% of pet-owning general population group reported abuse to family pet in past 12 months
Perceiving Animals as Sentient Beings vs. Viewing Pets as Property	Perceiving Animals as Sentient Beings vs. Viewing Pets as Property
• 90.5% of pet-abusers never or hardly ever tell their pets they love them	• 41.3% of non-abusers tell their pets they love them daily
• 81.8% of pet-abusers never or hardly ever show affection toward pets	• 84.8% of non-abusers show affection to pets daily or weekly
• Only 8% of pet-abusers take part in daily care/ play w/ pets	• 54% of non-abusers take part in daily care-taking and playing w/ pets
• 82.6% of pet-abusers talk to pets primarily through commands or threats	• 95.2% of non-abusers talk w/ their pets conversationally
• 60.9% of pet-abusers refer to pets as property	• 84.1% of non-abusers refer to pets as "full-fledged family members"
• 91.3% of pet abusing families do not celebrate their pet's birthday	• 55.6% non-abusers' families celebrate their pet's birthday
• Only 8.7% pet abusing families take pets on family vacations and/or family outings	• 47.6% of non-abusers' families take pets on family vacations and/or family outings
• In 56.5% pet abusing families pets are not allowed to reside indoors in the "living area" of home w/ rest of family	• 92.1% of the families of non-abusers allow pets to reside in "living area" of home w/ rest of family
• Only 8.7% of pet abusing families put pets' names on greeting cards	• 47.6% of non-abusers' families include pets' names w/ other family members names on greeting cards
Pets as Scapegoats	Pets as Scapegoats
• 29.2% of pet-abusers tend to blame pets for their feelings of frustration and anger/scapegoat pets	• Only 1.6% of non-abusers scapegoat the family pet
• 56.5% of pet-abusers tend to take frustrations out through frequent punishing of pets (a few times each week)	• 95% of non-abusers never or hardly ever take out their frustrations by punishing pets

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