

# The Psychology of Abuse

PHYSICIANS COMMITTEE FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE

5100 WISCONSIN AVE., N.W., SUITE 404 • WASHINGTON, DC 20016  
PHONE (202) 686-2210 • FAX (202) 686-2216 • PCRM@PCRM.ORG • WWW.PCRM.ORG

BY NEAL D. BARNARD, M.D.

**W**hy do people cut up animals and eat them? Why is burning animals, irradiating them, locking them in cages, and killing them considered acceptable in science? Why is shooting mammals and birds and hauling fish out of water on hooks considered pleasurable sport?

When I was a student in psychology, it was routine to force metal bars through the eardrums of live rats to hold them still in a stereotaxic frame. When I complained that even anesthetized rats would not enjoy waking up with broken eardrums, my professor joked that the rats were not going to be listening to their stereos anyway.

Since that time, I have come to note the importance of several psychological factors that allow abuse to continue:

## 1. The Failure of Inhibition

**T**here is a substantial scientific literature linking aggressiveness toward animals and aggressiveness toward people. When psychologists interview violent criminals, for example, they often find a history of cruelty to animals. In particular a triad of childhood symptoms—cruelty to animals, fire-setting, and bed-wetting—is predictive of aggressiveness in adulthood. What these symptoms have in common is the failure of inhibition. Children who cannot control their aggressive impulses toward animals will frequently grow into adults who have difficulty inhibiting aggressive impulses toward people. Typically, their parents failed to control aggressive behavior or actually received gratification from it.

Aggression is not usually due to sadism. Anyone can have an aggressive impulse. The problem is the failure to interrupt the progression from impulse to action. The professor who asked me to break rats' eardrums was not deriving pleasure from the pain of animals. Rather, he was unable to appreciate the suffering he was causing. His problem, like that of most animal researchers, was that his values were developed in a culture of science that does not recognize suffering, and fosters defenses against the recognition of suffering and death

of sentient beings other than humans. This was why a psychological study of cockfighters, practitioners of a "sport" in which 85 percent of the animals are killed, was unable to find a greater degree of sadism or psychosis than in the average nonparticipant from the same geographic area.

If aggression were always due to sadism, a major personality change would be needed for anyone to recognize the cruelty of his or her actions. Happily, this is not the case. Learning about the consequences of their actions has led many to diminish their aggressive impact on those around them.

## 2. Rationalization

**W**e tend to defend that to which we are accustomed. Rationalization allows us to find reasons to explain our actions. For instance, dissections are rationalized as "hands-on" experience for high school students. Rationalization is at its worst when economics are a factor. Tobacco farmers fought the mountain of evidence that weighed against them and justified their continued production of a harmful crop. Cattle ranchers justify their activities by calling themselves "environmentalists," and hunters do so by calling themselves "conservationists." Animal experimenters, when criticized, defend their work by resorting to reassuring images, such as afflicted children.

## 3. Animals as Reminders of Childhood

**A**s children, we naturally recognize our commonality with other creatures. We feel a bond with them, and incorporate them into our stories and playthings. As we attempt to leave the relics of childhood behind, however, associations with animals make us—especially the males among us—uncomfortable. To care about the suffering of animals calls up the childhood one is trying to leave behind. Some people use perverted animal images or involve themselves in cruel activities as part of the struggle for recognition of their adulthood. For example, they keep fighting dogs, boa constrictors, or tiger cubs to signify toughness. Fortunately, as people learn about the

complexities of nonhuman animals, and the vital environmental roles played by even the smallest of them, an appreciation of other lifeforms rapidly becomes a mark of sophistication rather than of childishness.

#### **4. Domination and Mating Strategies**

**I**t is not only the proud peacock who struts his stuff for a (hopefully) admiring female. Human males are preoccupied with displays of strength that indicate their genetic suitability. Hence the mark of a successful fisherman or hunter is not a full stomach, but a huge stuffed fish or a mounted rack of antlers. Domination plays a key role in hunting (note the importance of size in trophy animals) and especially in rodeo, where virtually every event involves throwing animals to the ground, tying them up, and keeping them immobilized. These displays of dominance are intended, however unconsciously, to impress available females and competing males.

#### **5. Deferral to Authority**

**T**he language of science is often as far beyond our comprehension as was the language of our parents when we were toddlers. Many of us have assumed that doctors and scientists have knowledge, and also moral judgement, superior to our own. In a classic experiment, psychologist Stanley Milgram told volunteers to administer what they believed to be potentially fatal electric shocks to human subjects. Unknown to the volunteers, the “shocked” subjects were actually working for Milgram. As the “electric current” was increased, some volunteers balked. But the experimenter’s reassurance caused them to continue, even when they believed they were risking the subject’s life. Milgram has been resoundingly criticized for conducting the experiment. But what was most frightening was the willingness of normal volunteers to follow orders to harm another living being.

#### **6. Fantasies about Animals**

**W**e project our own aggressive impulses onto animals. Cats are sometimes viewed as sneaky or aloof, probably because their facial muscles allow less expression, compared to dogs or primates. It is not as obvious what they are

actually feeling. Those people for whom hostility is a major issue may tend to imagine it in cats, or project their aggressive impulses onto cats. People who torture animals victimize cats much more frequently than dogs. And because of the association of felines with the female, men who behave violently toward women are likely to have abused cats, too.

Rats, snakes, and insects are viewed by some as vessels of infectious evil. Even though humans spread disease much more commonly than do rats, negative fantasies about animals tend to exaggerate relevant characteristics and lead to actions against them.

#### **7. Thinking in Only Two Categories**

**T**oddlers have trouble with complex thought. They tend to categorize their world in terms of extremes: good vs. bad; us vs. them; clean vs. dirty; black vs. white. More maturity is required to perceive shades of gray. Nevertheless, “us vs. them” thinking often continues into adulthood, where it can be exploited by politicians and movie directors alike. Differences between humans and animals may seem to overwhelm similarities and confine them to a category distinct from our own. This sort of thinking leads to the use of prejudice (e.g., rat vs. baby), rather than morally relevant criteria, as a basis for ethical decisions.

There is reason for some long-range optimism about human psychology. As we develop in infancy, our capacity to act on impulses matures before our capacity to inhibit or modulate those actions. So, we go through a stage in which we babble, wet ourselves, and throw and break objects. Only later do we learn to speak, to control body functions, and to explore the nature of objects without breaking them.

Civilizations mature in the same way. We developed the capacity for the most grotesque aggressions before we learned, gradually, to inhibit those actions. We gave up cannibalism. Human slaves were freed. Most of us have realized that wife-beating is unacceptable.

With animals, we’re just emerging from the babbling, wetting, destroying stage. One day we will look back in embarrassment and shame at the suffering we caused them for so long.