
Perceptions of Family Violence: Are Companion Animals in the Picture?

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Service and education organizations such as the ASPCA claim a connection between family violence against children and companion animals, but to what extent does the general public share this perception? Sixty-three undergraduates rated their certainty about perceiving family violence using 60 pictures with differing potential targets of family violence. Participants showed stronger certainty when the target was a child than when the target was a companion animal, but ratings for companion animals averaged above the midpoint of the scale used. Interview questions were used to obtain information about childhood recollections of joint discipline situations in which children received punishment for what companion animals did, or vice versa. Thirty-four participants recalled such situations, some of which resulted in the death or discarding of a family's companion animal. The majority of participants affirmed a connection between violence against children and companion animals in the family, with some giving credit for that insight to their taking part in the study.

Struck by a conference presentation slide of a child cowering away from a looming fist holding a belt, my students and I wondered if viewers would react differently if a companion animal rather than a child were threatened in the picture. The question led to this study, in which we developed a picture-sorting technique to detect variations in adults' perceptions of family violence that were dependent upon children and companion animals being interchanged as elements in the pictures. Interview questions further explored ways in which children's and companion animals' lives are connected in family events involving violence or joint discipline.

The Interweaving of Abuse of Companion Animals and Children

The question of how abuse of children and companion animals is connected is being asked frequently by practitioners but seldom by researchers studying family

violence. The question is usually asked in terms of a simple relationship: Do adults who abuse their children also abuse the family's companion animals?

Though logically part of the family violence picture, companion animals seem to be hidden in plain sight. In a solitary study, DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983) confirmed that families in which child abuse is found also tend to treat companion animals badly. Traditional profiles of violence toward children have not included more than anecdotal information on companion animals (Gelles & Straus, 1988). While effects on children as targets, witnesses, scapegoats, proxies, and in pecking orders are studied, these same roles for companion animals are not yet in the mainstream picture. Of the 160 items in Milner's widely used Child Abuse Potential Inventory (1994), only one item includes companion animals. Patterson's studies (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) of families' coercive strategies and aggression did not include companion animals. And in an extensive review of the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of violence (Widom, 1989), companion animals are not mentioned, although Widom noted the importance of refining the examination of situational variables (one of which might be companion animal involvement).

Leading animal welfare and humane education groups such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA, 1992) and the Latham Foundation (Loar & White, 1992; Tebault, 1994) assert the importance and pervasiveness of the relationship between violence against children and against companion animals. Great concern is expressed not just for the immediate and devastating damage done separately to children and to companion animals but for the insidious lifelong damage to children's attitudes and behaviors toward companion animals.

In the only study to compare perceptions of abuse of children and companion animals (Roscoe, Haney, & Peterson, 1986), adolescents and young adults rated all forms of abusive maltreatment provided on a checklist as harmful (averaging more than seven on a scale of nine), but abuse of children as significantly worse than that of companion animals. Of the 10 abusive acts listed, hitting with hands was given the least harmful rating when either children or companion animals were targets, while hitting with a leather strap ranked closer to the midpoint. Participants reported some previous responsibility for caring for children (4%) or companion animals (45%). This did not seem to affect ratings of actions against companion animals, but was related to rating some use of physical force directed against children as less harmful. Interestingly, the authors concluded that these participants' generally high disapproval of abusive and neglectful behaviors "may reflect

inappropriate standards regarding parenthood and unrealistic expectations for themselves as parents' (p. 813). They added that students should be educated to use appropriate strategies when caring for companion animals and be selective about applying these strategies to children – otherwise, children may receive the results of parents' earlier faulty socialization and violent experiences with companion animals.

Many studies link family violence and the fates of companion animals in some way, without giving the complete picture of how the abuse of children and animals interweaves. Abusive, harsh, or chaotic discipline of children by parents has repeatedly been implicated as a causal factor in children's cruelty to animals (Felthous, 1980; Tapia, 1971). Felthous and Kellert (1987) and Ascione (1993) have reviewed the literature and concluded that a pattern of cruelty to animals by children is predictive of later aggression toward people. Ascione sampled the literature and quoted vivid anecdotal portraits, showing that abusive parents or siblings may torment children by killing family companion animals.

Thus, an entire tapestry of warped and torn threads is woven – children and companion animals are abused, with parents sometimes establishing a coercive linkage between the two; children are cruel to companion animals; and children grow up to repeat and spread the pattern of violence. The question is, does the general public perceive this intergenerational, interspecies violence as a single, unified picture?

Rosy Scenes, Horrific Snapshots, and Everything in Between

Abuse, coercion, and aversive discipline seem mystifying, on the face of it, in a nation that claims to not only love children but to consider companion animals as family members (e.g., Cain, 1985). Companion animals are extremely popular, in fact, normative, in United States households with children (Kidd & Kidd, 1985; Melson, 1988). Attachment to companion animals has been assessed in various ways and found to be strong but not universal among children (Davis & Juhasz, 1995; Kidd & Kidd, 1985). The importance of early family experiences in forming this positive bonding and generalizing it to later relationships with companion animals has been highlighted (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1988; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Schenk, Templer, Peters, & Schmidt, 1994; Soares, 1985).

Yet it is clear from the tragic data available about the abuse of children (Gelles & Straus, 1988) that family membership is not necessarily a shield against violence.

A variety of writers hint at problems behind the scenes. For companion animals, claims of family membership by humans do not prevent the discarding and death of millions of companion animals per year in the United States (ASPCA, 1992). There is a tension between their status as property and their rights as individuals (Plous, 1993a). Plous (1993b), Boat (1995), and Ascione (1993) noted the difficulties in defining abuse of animals when it is largely a matter of societal perceptions or standards of acceptability that vary by the species in question and the context. Nineteen percent of the DeViney et al. (1983) respondents in abusive families admitted “they would be unconcerned or even happy if anything happened to their pets” (p. 323).

Shared Lives and Joint Discipline

Most families are not abusive in the legal sense. Something less dramatic but perhaps as destructive is happening in nonclinical families. Graziano (1994) and Straus (1991) have eloquently spoken for the importance of studying sub-abusive violence and corporal punishment of children as factors in the development of aggression. Patterson’s extensive studies of troubled families (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) highlighted the importance of recording and understanding escalating chains of coercive behavior that begin innocuously as family members attempt to influence each other with aversive, contingent behaviors but build to aggression. In the same way, the study of companion animals must extend beyond horrific abuse into the hazards of daily living. Cain’s (1985) discussion of the place of companion animals in the family did note that 44% of her respondents stated that companion animals got brought into situations (“triangled in”) in which there was tension between two human family members and would sometimes defuse the situation or other times be hit. Other families reported purposely avoiding bringing companion animals into human conflicts.

Little in the psychological literature directly addresses the issue of the life-threatening problems companion animals may face in nonclinical families, but there are hints that typical children’s experiences with companion animals may involve not just loving caregiving but witnessing or initiating disposal of a companion animal. For instance, Kidd, Kidd, and George (1992) discussed parents’ adopting a companion animal with certain expectations for the role the companion animal will hold in their child’s life as a possible risk factor because these expectations are unrealistic – notably, that the companion animal will keep the child busy, teach the child to love or nurture, or teach the child responsibility. In this study, 20% of adopters no longer had the companion animal after six months. In

their 1985 study of children and companion animals, the Kidds noted that 36% of the children reported owning their current companion animal for less than one year. This may indicate a high turnover rate, especially for short-lived species kept as companion animals. Carmack (1985) and Dickinson (1992) have discussed the deaths of companion animals and the possibility of intense grief, but did not address the area of companion animal deaths that have occurred due to purposeful family actions (except for an example given by Dickinson of eating a chicken). Again, a key question is how much of this turnover involving loss, disposal, or death of a companion animal occurs in the family context of coercive discipline or teaching a “life lesson”?

There seem to be several pages missing from the family photo album between the rosy pictures of love for companion animals and the eventual fate of companion animals in both troubled and nontroubled families. In troubled families, though, the horrific final snapshot has been described in case studies in which parents involve children as witnesses to or even accomplices in the torture and mutilation of companion animals in order to terrorize the children and demonstrate their helplessness (Ascione, 1993; Hendrickson, McCarty, & Goodwin, 1990; Robin & ten Bensel, 1985) while some children try desperately to defend their companion animals. Companion animals are both an emotional resource for children and a source of great vulnerability.

This study extended the concept of the shared lives of children and companion animals beyond abuse by asking for adults’ recollections of instances in which a child was punished for what the companion animal did, or vice versa – a concept we labelled *joint discipline*. Joint discipline seems to be a meaningful way to investigate the continuum of parent-directed aversive events that children and companion animals experience together or because of each others’ actions. This continuum ranges from mundane events such as a child being held responsible and told to clean up a companion animal’s poop, through coercion and threats to the companion animal in order to get the child to behave, and can extend to the discarding or killing of the companion animal and the emotional torment this causes the child. Joint discipline is one aspect of how children’s and companion animals’ daily lives routinely intertwine and sometimes enter the realm of shared physical and emotional abuse.

Putting Companion Animals into the Picture

It is time to complete the picture of family violence by adding companion animals. This study used two techniques, picture-sorting and interviewing. Three aims were

addressed. First, ratings given to pictures were used to test the extent to which companion animals are included in adults' perceptions of family violence. Interview questions also addressed this issue. It was hoped that the use of the combined picture and interview approach would help avoid social desirability responses and assist in quantifying the connections perceived between violence against children and companion animals. Second, a discipline cue (a broken cup) in some pictures was included to see whether adults perceived less violence when a child or companion animal was apparently to blame for some misbehavior and might be seen as receiving deserved punishment. Finally, interview answers told us how many of these adults recollected experiences of joint discipline and what had happened to children and companion animals when parents linked the fates of children and companion animals in this way.

Method

Sample

Sixty-three college students (M age = 29.4 years) participated in individual interviews after being recruited via flyers, word of mouth, or announcements in classes. Most were psychology students; some received extra credit from their instructors. Recruitment referred only to a study of "family interactions," without mentioning the family violence or companion animals aspects of the research. Perhaps for this reason, markedly better success obtained in recruiting females ($n = 48$) than males ($n = 15$).

Procedure, Informed Consent Issues, and Materials

Part One. An informed consent form with standard provisions was signed by participants before they began the first part of the study. In their individual appointments, participants were asked to complete a picture-sorting task. Sixty 8½" by 11" line drawings were presented in random order. They combined three types of elements: a potential threat in the foreground of a room, a potential target in the corner, and a discipline cue on the floor. There were five variations of potential threat (a male or female fist holding a belt, a male or female hand holding a piece of paper, or no hand), six variations of potential target (dog, cat, girl, boy, plant, or none), and two variations of discipline cue (a broken cup with spilled liquid, or no cup), yielding 60 different pictures. Figure 1 shows examples of the pictures used.

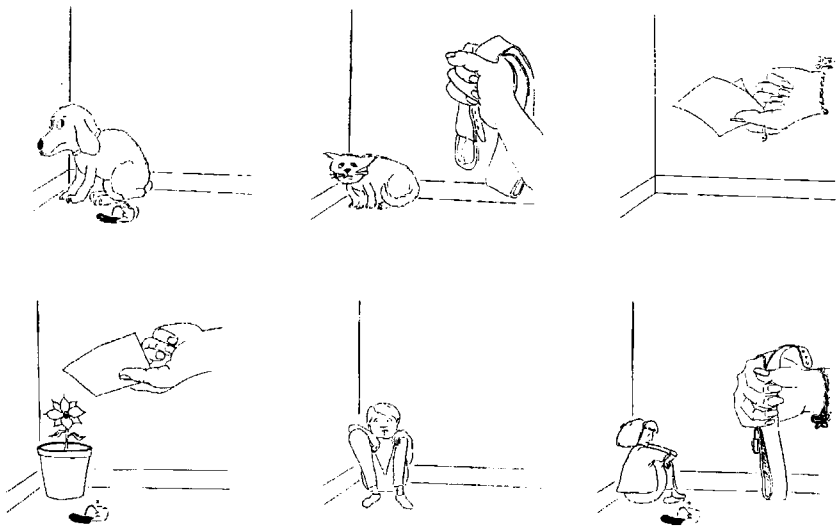


Figure 1. Examples of pictures used in the family violence picture sorting task.

Our pilot set of pictures used an open, extended hand intended to be a neutral contrast to the fist holding a belt, but several pilot participants perceived the open hand as a hand getting ready to slap. We then chose a hand holding a piece of blank paper as a neutral cue, but, as will be seen in the results, some participants saw a nonviolent threat in this also (the Bad Report Card factor).

Sorting used a continuum of five marked placements for stacks, ranging from “1: I am SURE this IS NOT family violence” through stacks representing uncertainty (2: probably not, 3: not sure, 4: probably) to the other extreme, “5: I am SURE this IS family violence.” The continuum is meant to represent the degree of certainty a participant has about including or excluding a picture with a particular combination of elements in their own conceptualization of family violence. The sorting task was preceded by practice using a half dozen pictures. The practice instructions stressed that participants were being asked simultaneously to judge both the elements of “violence” and “family” in the pictures, i.e., the fifth stack was

reserved for certainty about family plus violence and the other stacks for pictures representing less certainty about family or violence. Although this did not permit later clear interpretation of whether ratings for companion animals were chiefly due to perceptions of lesser family membership or lesser violence, we intended that the two concepts be equally activated for participants. When earlier studies had asked separately about family membership for companion animals (Cain, 1985) and the harmfulness of different forms of abuse (Roscoe, Haney, & Peterson, 1986) ceiling effects seemed apparent: two-thirds of Cain's respondents reported companion animals as "full" family members with almost all the rest reporting close friendship, and Roscoe, Haney, and Peterson's respondents gave ratings averaging 7 or above on a 9-point scale. We hoped to avoid a ceiling effect by forcing respondents to apply "family" and "violence" concepts to companion animals simultaneously.

After the sorting task, participants were asked demographic questions and items about why they sorted the pictures the way they did. All participants completed this section of the study.

Part Two. Following the picture-sorting task, participants were asked more detailed questions about their experiences with any connections between violence or discipline against children and companion animals. Because of the sensitive information that could be revealed in Part Two of the interview, modified informed consent and confidentiality procedures were used. Participants received more information and signed a second form before continuing.

Participants were requested to use no names or identifying information in answering these questions. However, if participants chose to provide enough identifiable information about current (within the past seven years) instances of abusive violence against a child, they were informed that this information would be relayed to the local Child Protective Services office. This modification of the general confidentiality policy is acceptable and even required by law in some states, according to information provided by the APA Science Directorate and researchers in the area of child abuse. According to the same experts, there is no clear-cut policy about confidentiality and reports of current abuse against animals. The officer of the APA Science Directorate stated that reporting of such incidents could take place if the informed consent briefing and forms included such a disclaimer. Given our own philosophy about humane treatment of animals, the overall thrust of this study, and the fact that participants might already be reacting to the policy about reporting child abuse when giving their responses, we decided to include a parallel modification of the informed consent procedure to report any current instances (with

identifiers) of violence against animals to the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This disclaimer appeared in the consent form used for Part Two.² It is apparently the first time such a disclaimer about animals has been used in research.

To protect against misunderstandings about these disclaimers, participants were thoroughly briefed and reminded of their voluntary participation. No participants gave current, identifiable information, though many gave incidents from their own childhood with identifiers or disguised current identifiers, in a few situations making the responses sound stilted (e.g., referring to “a child”). Because the question wording asked for knowledge about certain experiences rather than limiting the experiences to those in the participants’ own childhoods, some responses referred to experiences of friends and extended family members. One participant did decline to complete Part Two because of legal concerns. Some participants seemed uncomfortable with the questions but chose to answer, and some seemed to welcome the opportunity to talk. Debriefing included a handout with contact information about how to find help and support for any concerns about the research, companion animal abuse, or family violence issues.

Reliability. For open-ended responses, we created categories, scored answers independently, and then resolved disagreements by consensus. This approach was used for responses about joint discipline and statements about the connections between violence against children and companion animals.

Results

The campus where data were collected is a commuter college and participants therefore differ somewhat from the profile found at undergraduate residential schools. Averaging 29.4 years old ($SD=9.7$), they ranged in age from 18 to 56. One-fourth were currently married. Just over one-third had children under the age of 18 living in their households – in some cases their own children, in others their siblings. These households contained an average of 2.1 children.

The inclusion of companion animals in households varied. Forty-six (73%) lived with one or more companion animals in their household (11 of the 15 males and 35 of the 48 females). They averaged 2.5 companion animals in these households, with a range from 1 to 14. Of those living with companion animals, 24% reported a household with cats and possibly animals other than dogs, 46% a household with dogs and possibly animals other than cats, 17% a household with

both cats and dogs and possibly other species, and 13% with only species other than cats or dogs. Forty-three respondents answered an item about who considered the companion animals “theirs,” with 11 (26%) participants claiming the companion animals for themselves, eight (19%) saying that one other family member did, 15 (35%) saying the whole family, and nine (21%) that some companion animals belonged to one person and some to the family. The 45 responses about who took care of the animals were similar: 12 (27%) reported doing this themselves, 12 (27%) said one other person in the family did, 15 (33%) that everyone helped out, and six (13%) that there was a mix of responsibilities.

The ratings of family violence given to the pictures varied systematically according to what target element was in the corner of the picture. The mean family violence rating given to the 60 pictures was 2.77 ($SD = .62$), just below the midpoint of three on the five-point scale. For some analyses, pictures were grouped by the target element. Mean family violence ratings for these groupings ranged from a low of 1.75 for pictures including a plant through 2.05 for no target, 3.02 for a cat, 3.04 for a dog, 3.31 for a boy, and 3.48 for a girl. The cat and dog target pictures were not rated as significantly different, but the boy and girl pictures were ($t = -4.74, p < .001$). Treated collectively, pictures including children were rated with significantly more certainty about showing family violence than pictures with companion animals ($M = 3.40$ for children, 3.03 for animals with $t = 4.76, p < .001$).

Ratings also varied according to some of the nontarget picture elements. A comparison of the family violence ratings given to pictures with a male fist versus a female fist holding a belt showed a significant difference (male fist $M = 3.67$, female fist $M = 3.50, t = 3.66, p < .001$). Half of the pictures in which a child or companion animal was the potential target included a broken cup and spilled liquid as a discipline cue. These pictures were also rated as different (cup $M = 4.12$, no cup $M = 4.06, t = 2.07, p < .043$).

Although the number of participants is low for such an analysis, a factor analysis was run to glean further insights into how the pictures were perceived. This analysis yielded very clear-cut results. Five strong factors emerged, with no picture appearing in more than one factor (using a factor-loading criterion of .6 or greater). The first factor includes 11 of the 12 pictures containing a companion animal target but no fist looming: This factor might be called Sad Animal. The second factor includes all eight of the pictures with combinations of a companion animal and a looming fist: Threatened Animal. The third factor includes seven of the eight pictures of a child and a hand holding a piece of paper: because of comments made

by participants while sorting, this is called Bad Report Card. The fourth factor includes six pictures of plants: Plant. Finally, the fifth factor includes seven of the eight pictures in which a child and a fist appear: Threatened Child.

A MANOVA using a dummy variable for between-subjects variance tested for differences in the family violence ratings given to the pictures in the five factors. Mean ratings for the factors were Sad Animal = 2.46, Threatened Animal = 3.85, Bad Report Card = 2.88, Plant = 1.56, and Threatened Child = 4.35. MANOVA results were highly significant, $F(4, 248) = 180.03, p < .001$). Follow-up t tests on selected pairs of factors showed that the Threatened Animal and Threatened Child ratings differed ($t = -4.76, p < .001$), as did the Sad Animal and Threatened Animal ratings ($t = -12.08, p < .001$), and the Bad Report Card and Threatened Child ratings ($t = -14.29, p < .001$).

Demographic characteristics of participants had relatively little to do with how pictures were rated. Neither participant's age nor the presence of companion animals in the household made a difference in the family violence ratings given to the pictures, whether analyzed collectively, by target groupings, or by factor. The presence of children in the home did not influence the family violence rating given to the whole collection of 60 pictures, but was related to ratings given to pictures of children (child in household $M = 3.18$, no child $M = 3.51, t = -2.09, p = .041$) Participants with children in the household gave a lower family violence rating to the pictures in the factor Bad Report Card (child in household $M = 2.59$, no child $M = 3.04, t = -2.00, p < .051$ 2-tail).

Participant's gender did affect family violence ratings. For the full collection of 60 pictures, males gave a mean rating of 2.51, females a mean of 2.86 ($t = -1.91, p = .034$). Females differed from males in how they rated three of the five factors. For the factor, Threatened Animal, females gave a mean rating of 3.99, males a rating of 3.40 ($t = -1.99, p = .03$). For Bad Report Card, females' mean was 3.05, males' was 2.33 ($t = -2.83, p = .005$). Threatened Child received a mean rating of 4.51 from females, 3.84 from males ($t = -3.45, p = .001$).

When asked why they sorted the pictures the way they did, 58 participants (92%) cited the fist and belt, 44 (70%) described the children and their expressions, 33 (52%) referred to the companion animals and their expressions, and 23 (37%) cited the broken cup. Participants were not asked directly whether they consider companion animals to be family members, but when asked why they sorted the pictures the way they did when rating family violence, 10 (16%) spontaneously said that companion animals are not part of the family while 5 (8%) commented that they are.

Thirty-eight (61%) participants stated that the pictures reminded them of events in their own life. Fifteen (13 females and 2 males) said they themselves were hit with a belt or object as a child, and 10 (5 females and 5 males) saw animals mistreated.

When asked whether they had ever been in or heard of a situation in which an adult used a family companion animal in trying to discipline a child, e.g., putting an indoor companion animal outside because a child misbehaved, 18 (29%) of the participants answered yes. Twenty-six (42%) stated that they knew about situations in which a child was used to discipline a companion animal, e.g., being scolded when the companion animal made a mess. Asked to describe such events, participants detailed family situations encompassing the mundane and the tragic (Table 1).

Table 1. Discipline situations involving companion animals and children

6 (18%)*	A companion animal was given away to punish a child.
2 (6%)	An adult threatened to give a companion animal away to punish a child.
10 (29%)	A companion animal was scapegoated, abused, or killed to punish a child.
7 (21%)	Access to a companion animal was restricted to punish a child.
25 (74%)	A child was punished for companion animal misbehavior or for not doing companion animal chores.

*Percents are given for the 34 participants who answered that they knew about some form of joint discipline situation. Percents for those completing Part Two at all ($n = 62$) are 10%, 3%, 16%, 11%, and 40%, respectively.

Examples show the range of situations described:

“My best friend adopted a dog from the SPCA for their 7-year-old child and the child couldn’t keep up with care of the dog so the child was punished by removal of the dog back to the SPCA.”

“A child had a cat and when the child misbehaved or the stepfather wanted him to do something he would put the cat in a cage...until he did what the stepfather wanted, then the cat could go.”

“A friend of mine got scolded (not hit) because the dog broke a vase or something and he was warned ahead of time not to let the dog in the house.”

“I had two Golden Retrievers as a kid and supposedly wasn’t taking care of them, but I was, it was a scapegoat thing, and they got rid of the dogs and that was fairly hurtful. The dogs were like a bargaining chip to ensure good behavior from us kids.”

“We had a puppy. It was more or less my responsibility to make sure it was quiet at night, and my dad would come out and say, “Shut that thing up!” It was a real dilemma because I couldn’t let the dog inside and that’s what it wanted and I was opening and closing the sliding glass door and then I figured out to go out and sleep with the dog and then I got in trouble for that.”

“When I was a kid I got in trouble because my cat had kittens on my mother’s bedspread and I got hit for that.”

“One of my friends said she wouldn’t buy a German Shepherd because when she was little her father would beat her German Shepherd when she wouldn’t do what he wanted until she did and it reminded her too much of it. Her dog was finally killed.”

Finally, when asked about whether they saw a connection between violence against children and violence against companion animals, 43 (69%) responded affirmatively. The connection was described in terms of shared characteristics of abusers by 22 (36%) participants (e.g., “I think anyone who would lash out in anger at a child would kick a dog”). Similar characteristics of children and companion animals were cited by eight (13%) (e.g., “Both pets and children need a lot of attention and love,” “Both are relatively helpless against a larger person”). A combination of shared abuser and target characteristics were described by 13 (21%). As the data-collection ended, eight participants (13%) stated they saw no connection. The other 18% gave answers about violence that did not address the issue of connection. About half of the participants (32) said that the study gave them no new thoughts or feelings about family violence, while 22 (36%) claimed new insights about family violence against companion animals and eight (13%) claimed insights about children and family violence. Some of those stating they had no new insights noted that they already had an extensive understanding because of their own experiences.

Discussion

As the study began, we had concerns that the innovative informed consent disclaimer about reporting current abuse of animals would result in refusals to participate or biasing of data. Refusal does not seem to have occurred to any significant degree. We do not believe the joint discipline descriptions are biased in either a social desirability or over-reporting direction. For humane reasons such an approach should be used in future studies, just as it has been used in recent studies of child abuse.

Ratings of pictures showed that perceptions of family violence vary systematically depending on the target. Pictures of children are consistently rated with more certainty as showing family violence, especially if the picture also includes a fist and belt. Pictures with companion animals are rated with less certainty as showing family violence, but are still above the midpoint on the scale used, indicating some tendency to include companion animals within the scope of family violence. Both the factor analysis and the comments of participants about why they sorted the pictures the way they did seem to show that deciding about violence was more salient in the sorting process than deciding about family membership (e.g., the pictures of children in the Bad Report Card factor received a lower rating than the pictures of Threatened Animals). That participants perceive less violence in pictures of companion animals than in those of children echoes Roscoe et al. (1986). It is not so clear where these participants stand on the issue of family membership for companion animals, although the study avoided an automatic socially desirable response on that issue. More direct follow-up interview questions in this area would have helped. However, whether weaker perceptions of family violence when companion animals are involved could be traced to lesser status as family members or to failure to perceive violence when they are targets, the results tend to converge to produce high vulnerability for companion animals.

Overall, the picture-rating technique proved fruitful in helping to quantify differences in perceptions and in forming a basis for the interview. The picture set needs to be improved in future research by making sure the boy and girl are in exactly the same pose (some participants saw the boy as defiant because he was less huddled) and that the male and female fists hold the belt in the same position (some participants saw the female belt as a leash). The broken cup should probably be eliminated. It was intended as a cue that the child or companion animal had broken it and was being punished, but some participants regarded it as having been thrown

at them. The plant should be retained, because ratings for it show that not all targets fall within perceptions of family violence. The fact that pictures with a plant actually received lesser ratings of family violence than pictures with no target whatsoever appears puzzling. We speculate that the plant either functioned as an anti-violence cue, or, as indicated in some interviews, respondents saw the empty corner as ominous.

Additional variations in the pictures could test hypotheses about violence against differing companion animals species such as rabbits, turtles, birds, etc., therefore giving a better picture of humans' hierarchical thinking or the likelihood that these common but allegedly "lower order" companion animals are likelier targets for coercive joint discipline and disposal by adults. Including pictures with a child's hand would be interesting because sib-sib and child-companion animal violence are likely to be frequent. Results from the picture set could be related to personality characteristics such as empathy or to behaviors such as known animal abuse or animal rights activism. Connection with scores on established family violence measures could aid in rounding out the picture.

In this study, neither age nor the presence of companion animals in the household predicts ratings given to pictures (unlike the Roscoe et al. 1986 study that found some relationship between caring for companion animals and more tolerance for abusive acts). The number of participants reporting sole care for a companion animal was too small to use in analyses, but some form of companion animal attachment measure should be used in the future. In a parallel to the Roscoe et al. findings, the presence of children in the home seemed to have a slight effect on lessening the perception of family violence, but only in the case of the Bad Report Card – perhaps these adults saw distress but not violence in that situation. The gender of participants, the gender of the fist in the pictures, and the gender of the target child all seemed to make a difference in family violence ratings but there are some methodological problems (low number of male participants, differing poses of target children) that make these findings weak. Gender should be used as a variable in future studies.

The percent of participants reporting knowing about joint discipline situations indicates that this is a common but not universal phenomenon in families. The figures obtained here are probably an underestimate because they are based on free recall. Answers given in this study could form the basis for a checklist to cue memory in future studies. As was expected, the situations described range from fairly routine and innocuous companion animal mess events through events that

clearly remain painful years later for participants and had sometimes endangered animals: being prohibited from contact with a companion animal, giving a companion animal away, or killing a companion animal. Further studies should track eventual outcomes for companion animals and the impact of these shared events on humans' later relationships with companion animals. If children are routinely punished for companion animals' behaviors or for not doing chores, if children are tormented by threats against their companion animals, and if children see companion animals mistreated or killed for what they themselves do, what does this do to the love that should be developing?

Finally, it is encouraging that most of these participants claimed to see a connection between violence against children and companion animals at the conclusion of the study. Just being asked to give the issue some thought helped them fill in the picture. This bodes well for current public education efforts, including poster campaigns, that give a simple message (Figure 2).

Notes

1. Mary Barlow and Judith A. Oliver assisted in the study from its conceptualization through data-entry during their time as undergraduates at California State University, Bakersfield. I wish to thank Ken Shapiro and two anonymous reviewers for editorial suggestions. Send correspondence to Psychology Department, California State University, Bakersfield, CA 93311 or e-mail craupp@csubak.edu.

2. The relevant disclaimer portion of the informed consent form for Part Two reads "However, if you choose to tell us about instances of violence against children or animals in ways that identify the person doing the violence and the victims, we will be reporting such suspected incidents to Child Protective Services or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, respectively. They can pursue such information at their discretion. Our decision to report will be based upon currency (past seven years), inflicting injury on or allowing injury to a child (including excessive or forceful discipline that leaves injuries), or acting with intent to maim, wound, torture, or kill an animal. If you do not understand this policy or feel concern about it, please do not continue the study. Aside from identifiable information you give us about incidents of suspected child abuse or cruelty to animals, your responses will be kept confidential." We made clear to participants that terms such as "my father" or "my aunt" did not fit the criteria for identifiable events: Participants would have to give full names to result in a report.

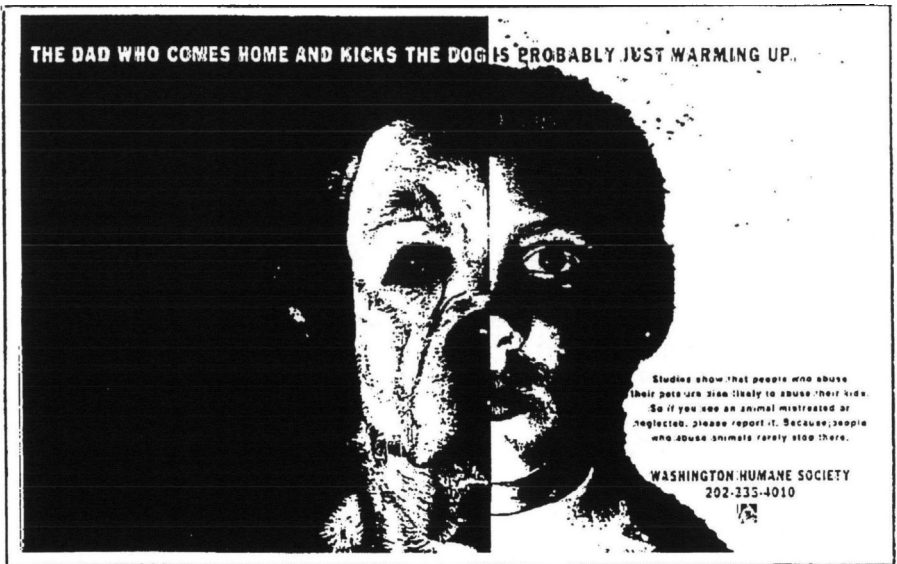


Figure 2. From posters distributed by the Los Angeles Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (213-730-5300) and the Washington Humane Society (202-333-4010). Used by permission.

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