

The Psychology of Abuse

PHYSICIANS COMMITTEE FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE

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Why 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

There 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

We 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

As 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