



Since the mid-1980s, Arnold Arluke has been watching us.

Don't be creeped out: It's a good thing. Arluke is a professor of sociology and anthropology at Northeastern University and senior scholar at Tufts University's Center for Animals and Public Policy. His most recent book, *Just a Dog: Understanding Animal Cruelty and Ourselves*, is a fascinating and provocative examination of the subject of animal abuse.

Instead of looking at the animals' experience, he looks at those who try to help them—humane law enforcement officers and shelter workers—and observes how they attempt to process and understand cruelty. Arluke's subject matter is broad in scope, covering everything from the experiences of hoarders to the “no kill”/open-admission debate. The book even devotes some pages to a discussion of marketers who rely on cruelty cases to generate support for shelters.

Essential reading for those with an interest in the humane movement, *Just a Dog* is likely to create some controversy in the field because of its questions about some of our core beliefs—most notably, the presumed link between animal cruelty and violence towards people. *Animal Sheltering* associate editor Carrie Allan spoke to Arluke about his research; excerpts of that interview appear here.

The Context of Cruelty

How did you get involved in studying people who work with animals?

I'm a sociologist, so I got involved in this not so much as an advocate [but] more as someone who's interested in the culture of laboratories and science that made it possible for people to do these animal experiments without assuming that they are fundamentally flawed or sadistic. I found that when I was doing that work, the whole area of human-animal relationships opened up to me as this gold mine, really, of fascinating relationships. And when I was studying their euthanasia of animals—which they call “sacrificing”—they kept saying, “Well, you should go to shelters because they do this euthanizing full time.”

Why did you start looking at animal cruelty particularly?

I was talking to someone [in the early '90s] about research that I was doing on the relationship of animal abuse to subsequent violence toward humans. And the person I was speaking with suggested that, as a sociologist, I might come at the issue of cruelty in a very fresh and new way. The feeling that he had, and I shared as I thought more about it, is that the intellectual or academic understanding of animal cruelty was arrested and very limited. To understand the nature and significance of cruelty, at least in America, we had to get beyond what I thought were very narrow approaches—and approaches, by the way, that were full of what I thought were faulty assumptions. It doesn't mean we have to stop the kind of work that was already going on ... but can't we supplement it and provide an alternative that really goes about asking very different questions? To stimulate thinking, I wanted to be more

sociological in looking at cruelty than the two literatures that I thought were the predominant literatures around.

What were those two literatures? What kind of gap did you see?

One literature I call the alarmist or advocacy literature, which serves an important function. It's a literature that's largely not research-based, and it argues, usually, for ever more unsavory and grotesque ways that humans cause suffering to animals. And by the way, I don't doubt that this occurs. And it really is a wake-up call ... for readers out there who may not be on the bandwagon to see animal cruelty as a horrible thing and something which we need to curtail. I often wonder whether it's often preaching more to the choir, but that's OK too; that serves a function. It sometimes is based on a few studies, but by and large, it's really to drum up support.

The other literature that's more of a research-based one is very psychologically driven, and that also has an important place. That literature tries to understand the causes of animal cruelty among children, and often it does this by looking at or arguing for seriously disturbed individual psychological flaws that are thought to be at the root of why a child will seriously harm an animal, and then the effects. The effects are [documented in] later psychological research, now known as “the link” studies that have sought to connect animal abuse with subsequent behaviors. They often focus on either serial killers or wife abusers. I felt we needed to somehow expand our understanding of what this thing is we call animal abuse, and understand more about the context around it that shapes its meaning.

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Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by “context”?

As a sociologist, I don't believe ... concepts like “animal cruelty” are best understood by looking at legal codes or definitions in the diagnostic and statistical manual for psychologists. Those kind of writ-

occur in childhood or adolescence and have no long-term subsequent effect that is observable or detectable in any way, by either looking at criminal records or a psychiatric interview. And to do that I really think is uncomfortable for the humane community.

ers and show that a good number of prisoners harmed animals as kids, and try to get beyond that to see under what circumstances this link exists. One of the things I note in the book is how many nice, average college students will report having harmed animals—although when we talk about this, too, we have to distinguish someone who [says] they harmed an animal because they crushed a butterfly versus someone who shot the neighbor's dog. There [is] an enormous range of kinds of abuses that occur. But I think that's again pointing to the need to refine the kind of research to understand, well, what is the difference? Is it normal in our culture to grow up and cause some harm to some animals versus more serious harm or egregious harm to higher animals? And what's the pathway that develops?

Do you think a universal definition of cruelty is even possible?

It's interesting you ask that question because when I studied humane law enforcement officers, they enforced laws that are often really ambiguous and fuzzy. A lot of them were written 100 years ago and hardly updated. And most of them talk mostly about horse abuse, for obvious reasons, given what our societies were like 100 years ago. And I would often say to them, “Wouldn't you like a whole new law that was really specific?” And I often got quite the opposite response: that having a very vague law allows humane law enforcement officers more play for themselves to define, in the field, what constitutes cruelty.

Another idea you raise in your book is that exposure or participation in cruelty may not always have a negative effect on people, and may occasionally have a positive one.

First of all, I want to be very clear

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ings and books are really for professionals, but they may not tell us a thing about how the animal abuser him or herself understands it, or how people who deal with animal abuse understand it. I wanted to ground the understanding of animal abuse in everyday life, so that was one goal of the book.

Another goal of the book was to not view animal abuse as invariably having long-term destructive impact on people. Again, the tradition of “the link” literature in psychology really shaped that image: that only by the grace of God can someone harm an animal and not become a really hideous adult. We have to allow that that can exist and understand when that occurs, but we also have to allow for the possibility—no matter how unsavory that is—that animal abuse can

Your questioning of the link between animal abuse and human violence is going to be pretty controversial.

Even [in] the scientific literature itself, [there's] not a consensus at all that the link is accurate. Even though there appear to be a number of studies, we also really haven't gone far enough to identify the specific kinds of abuse and conditions that are predictive of future violence. That would be the most helpful work, because I don't think it's useful to identify with a red flag every adolescent in every public school who harms an animal. I do think any adolescent who does needs *attention*, but I don't think that every adolescent who does it will be tomorrow's Jeffrey Dahmer. But I would like to identify those who would.

What I think we need is fewer studies that just interview prison-

what I mean by “positive” effects. I *never* advocate or support cruelty to occur. [As a sociologist], I’m looking at situations—in this case cruelty—[that have] some subsequent effects for people that for them is regarded as positive, or useful; that might be a better term. As I mentioned earlier, when cruelty does occur, even if there are “positive” uses, there’s no question that we need to look at its roots and try to prevent it.

But what you’re saying is that experiences or encounters with cruelty can be “character-building,” to put it in lay terms?

Each chapter really does look at a positive use or uses of cruelty. The one that looks at abusers themselves is the second chapter on [my interviews with a cross-section of] college students. When they tried to reconstruct their cruelty, many of them remembered it as a form of play—play that was, by the way, thrilling and exciting for different reasons, but nevertheless a form of play. And when I started thinking about that and doing more research, I found that there are social scientists who talk about what’s called “dirty play.” But they never talk about animal abuse as “dirty play”—they talk about things like using racist epithets or sexual play or gray-zone crimes that are really not serious. [It’s] this whole in-between area of kids doing things that adults find unsavory, but they’re not going to imprison the kids over.

And the literature on “dirty play” often suggests that there’s more the kids are doing than just harassing each other, or in this case, harassing animals. They’re rehearsing things they see adults doing that they’re not yet allowed to do. For example, a lot of the thrill kids would recall when they harmed animals involved first carrying it out so that no one would see it, because they knew that others would not approve, and then once it was done, making sure no one would hear about it. They would relate it to how they thought their parents or other authority figures had secrets, too. And it was the possession of knowledge that to them defined what an adult was. I found that it started ticking off, one after the other, that the way they saw

the abuse was really a rehearsal for what they saw adults doing. The most obvious example was hunting: many of them said they had uncles or parents who went hunting, but they weren’t allowed to go yet, or they could go but couldn’t shoot. And they very much wanted to partake in that adult activity, and animal abuse for them became a surrogate or pseudo form of hunting.

Now, the question is, how positive is this? Well, it’s positive only in the sense that one can view this interloping as a way that they’re transitioning from childhood or early adolescence into late adolescence or adulthood, and that like any other transition or rite of passage, such rites of passage are essential to forming adult identities. Now, should this be the way we do it? No. And should these children have been talked to about this and should it have been stopped? Yes. So again, to reaffirm, this is not a defense of what I call “normal” abuse, it’s merely saying that in our society, when it occurs, it looks like this. And for certain people it may be part of their developing sense of self and they may not go on as adults to commit any kind of crime, at least not any kind of violent crime. I found one or two people had some parking tickets and that was about all I could find. 🍌

For more of our interview with Arnold Arluke, see the next issue of Animal Sheltering.

