

An Overview of Animal Hoarding

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Abstract

Animal hoarding is an understudied problem affecting individuals, animals, and the community at large. Animal and human neglect go hand-in-hand as many hoarders also provide inadequate care for vulnerable children and adults living in the home. Appropriate media coverage and strong policies are needed to help combat the problem of animal hoarding. There is no current psychiatric diagnosis that addresses the pervasiveness of hoarding and research on appropriate treatments remains in its infancy. Social workers need to provide appropriate interventions with animal hoarders and educate other professionals about the problem. Animal hoarding will continue to affect many lives until it receives greater research and is better understood.

Introduction

Most people are familiar with the roles companion animals play in our lives and understand the benefits of adopting pets. Less familiar are homes with too many animals, when a pet is no longer “man’s best friend” but rather a liability. These are homes of animal hoarders. Animal hoarders are defined as any individual who possess a large number of companion animals, fails to provide adequate nutrition and veterinary care, and keeps the animals in a severely overcrowded environment.

Further, an animal hoarder fails to recognize or has a reckless disregard for the conditions the animals are living. As expressed in the 2001 Cruelty to Animals Act, animal hoarders

display an inability to recognize or understand the nature of or has a reckless disregard for the conditions under which the companion animals are living and the deleterious impact they have on the companion animals’ and owner’s health and well-being.

The act of animal hoarding poses problems not only for the psychological well-being of the hoarder, the overall welfare of the animals, but also for society’s responsibility to find appropriate ways to intervene to mitigate these concerns.

Hoarding: Effect on Animal Welfare

Individuals who hoard animals put animals at risk when they deprive animals of the basic principles of care. The same basic needs that humans require—appro-

priate food, shelter, healthcare, and stimulation—apply in similar ways to animals. Hoarders may be oblivious to their animals’ health and needs for veterinary care. As the number of animals hoarded increases in a household, conditions may deteriorate and lead to the spread of infectious diseases, animal starvation, and the accumulation of animal feces and urine. Animals that are deprived of care face both physical and psychological problems. Weight loss, parasites, and a poor fur coat may be early signals that animals are suffering. Ill animals may eventually begin eating the corpses of other animals when faced with survival (Wittmeier, 1999 as stated in Avery, 2005, p. 827). Fighting to survive, animals that are deprived of care face both physical and psychological problems.

It is common for hoarders to keep both live and dead animals in the same space. At least one dead animal was found in the homes of approximately 34% of animal hoarders (Berry, Patronek, and Lockwood, 2005): Deceased dogs were the most likely to be found (47.4%), followed by deceased cats (31.6%) (p. 176).

Rescuing animals from hoarding conditions is not as simple as merely taking animals from a hoarder’s home. Often, already stressed by disease and not likely socialized, the animals may be difficult for animal control authorities to confiscate. Animal shelters and the community at large are often faced with the difficulty of sheltering their animals. Once placed in often overcrowded shelters, the majority of animals are often not adoptable due to various behavior problems. It is difficult to ascertain the underlying psychological suffering animals face by confinement, lack of socialization, and overall neglect. Compounded by a multitude of issues, the majority of animals undergo euthanasia after placed in a shelter.

Hoarding: Human neglect as part of a pervasive problem

Animal hoarders have been found to neglect not only their pets, but also the care of other people in their home. These people may include dependent children, elderly, or disabled individuals (HARC, 2002; Patronek, 2001). This neglect surfaces as dangers to both humans and animals develop from the unsanitary conditions found in hoarder homes. HARC (2002) noted, “In a typical case, household interiors were coated, often several inches high, with human and animal urine and feces, sometimes to an extent that floors buckled” (p. 128). Many hoarder houses had no means of storing or preparing food in a safe manner.

Lack of basic utilities such as running water,

functional bathrooms, and electricity are not uncommon in some cases. Worth and Beck (1981) described a hoarder who died from complication of a bacterial infection linked to an organism in cat saliva. Other reports include hoarders becoming anemic after suffering numerous fleabites (Lockwood & Cassidy, 1988). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) (1989) noted that high ammonia levels from urine accumulation impaired ones' health through eye and respiratory tract irritation. OSHA's (1989) study concluded that animals exposed to high levels of ammonia "...were experiencing too much respiratory and eye irritation to be interested in their food" (para. 8). It is possible that vulnerable humans, including children and elders, may face effects of less nutritional intake similar to effects studied in animals.

It is through the effects of living in unsanitary conditions that authorities may learn of hoarders. What appear to be unrelated investigations such as children sent home from school due to poor hygiene, or an elderly individual hospitalized for numerous bedsores, often can be the first step in uncovering hoarding. Animal hoarding is a highly hidden insidious problem.

Further documented by a 2001 joint effort between the Humane Society of the United States and the National Center on Elder Abuse, 92.4% of workers in adult protective services had come across the co-existence of self-neglect and animal neglect. Cook-Daniels (2002) also explored the problem of self-neglect in regard to the animal hoarder's resistance to services, non-compliance with medical treatment, reclusive tendencies, and a hoarder's inability to take care of personal health and home needs. Succinctly stated in the Cook-Daniels study (2002), "...the piece that's been overlooked is that animal neglect is most often going hand-in-hand with human self-neglect" (p. 2).

Hoarding: A Challenge to the Media

The media, with any social issue, plays a central role in how and if the public is able to break apart its various dimensions. In regards to hoarding, media reports have mainly focused on the substandard and subhuman existence found in hoarding houses and stressed that neither animals nor humans should be exposed to the conditions. That said, the disorganized state of hoarders' homes often took precedence over animal suffering and reports of child neglect surpassed reports of animal neglect in both headlines and content (Arluke et al., 2002).

Shaping the public's emotional response continues to be a large component of media coverage. While explaining the cases in understandable formats, the media failed to provide a consistent picture of the depth and seri-

ousness of the problem of hoarding. The vague media portrayal of hoarders may add to the role, or lack thereof, played by government agencies.

Recognized yet often minimized, hoarding cases involving middle-class citizens such as veterinarians, breeders, and white-collar professionals have been portrayed as symbols of irony and inappropriateness. Yet, despite the crime story format of the media, many of these hoarders have been handled leniently in the legal system. Leniency by judges continues the lack of overall concern for hoarding and has supported the media's image of hoarders as harmless.

Hoarding: Current Legal Interventions and Legislation

Common legal problems animal hoarders may face include zoning violation fines, animal cruelty charges, and animal mischief charges. The majority of charges are misdemeanors and penalties include only small fines. It is often difficult to charge hoarders with felony charges since many states do not have specific laws. Prosecution of these charges is also very difficult. With each state and municipality enforcing different laws regarding animals, hoarders often face little reprimand. Further, no federal legislation exists regarding the care of animals by individuals or shelters. However, every state has animal cruelty laws requiring one to provide appropriate nutrition, shelter, and veterinary care, or they have a law that prohibits cruel treatment. Lacking animal hoarding laws, most states and municipalities leave no choice for authorities but to use outdated and ambiguous laws to address hoarding.

Most cases of hoarding are first discovered when a person is charged with animal neglect or cruelty. Numerous citations for lack of adequate shelter, nutrition, and veterinary care often force law enforcement to write a separate ticket for each animal and each offense. Patronek, as cited in Kuehn (2003), stated, "...more serious charges may be buried and it may seem that law enforcement is being overly aggressive and harassing a well-meaning person" (p. 1). Using numerous citations may trivialize the offenses and the hoarder may ultimately gain public sympathy.

Once hoarding situations are identified, states such as Illinois, Vermont, and New Mexico all have excellent laws to intervene on the behalf of animals and individuals. Illinois became the first state to create a law that specifically deals with animal hoarders. Illinois' 2001 Cruelty to Animals Act 92-0454 defines animal hoarders and mandates the court to order all convicted hoarders to undergo a psychological or psychiatric exam and to undergo any treatment deemed appropriate at their own

expense. The laws of Vermont and New Mexico have similar stipulations of required psychological assessment and treatment of hoarders. Upon conviction under these laws, the court may bar the individual from owning any animals or conspiring with others to collect animals on the hoarder's behalf for a period of time that the court deems reasonable. Convicted hoarders will not be allowed to adopt the seized animals.

Despite improvements in legislation, there continue to be concerns. Berry, Patronek & Lockwood's (2005) study of 56 cases from 26 states found that in only 26% of cases studied the court ordered mental health evaluations or pretrial psychological assessments of the defendants. HARC (2002) noted the reluctance to recommend counseling as surprising because many hoarder behaviors appeared to be symptoms of larger psychological concerns based on the neglect of themselves, the animals, and their homes. Some hoarders' attorneys noted the clients had mental health histories and some investigators asked the judges to view the hoarders as irrational and incompetent. Without formal psychological intervention, recidivism has become a persistent problem for animal hoarders following legal action. Patronek (2006) noted recidivism of nearly 100% after prosecution. Animal hoarders who do not stay in their communities often begin hoarding in another location. Handy (1994) describes a case where animal control officers seized more than 50 animals from a hoarder in Maryland and within two days the hoarder had already acquired 20 more animals.

Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

Despite certain stereotypes of types of people with many animals, animal hoarders are not restricted by gender, socioeconomic, or age restrictions. Both males and females, professionals and unemployed, young and old hoarders have been identified. Public perceptions of hoarders as unemployed, retired, or of a lower socioeconomic class may distort the fact that hoarders can be professionals. One study (Patronek, 1999) found that 76% of hoarders are female, and 46% were over 60 years of age. Approximately half of the hoarders lived in a single-person household.

Hoarders have different patterns in terms of animal collection. Worth & Beck determined in a 1981 study that men more often collected dogs, and women more often collected cats. The animals most frequently involved in Patronek's (1999) study were cats, dogs, farm animals, and birds with an average of 39 animals per case. There have been some reports of more than 100 animals in one household. Patronek (1999) reported meeting animal hoarders who organized their dead animals by the date of

death, size, and color.

The varied reasons leading one to hoard animals share certain characteristics reflecting loneliness or isolation, either currently or throughout the lifespan. The majority of animal hoarders reported starting to collect things in childhood (Worth & Beck, 1981). Patronek (2001) stated, "...hoarders grew up in chaotic households with inconsistent parenting, in which animals may have been the only stable feature" (p. 7). Hoarders may choose to keep animals as a reminder of the only stability they knew growing up. Once a person has begun hoarding, characteristics include surrounding oneself with numerous animals that are not being cared for, focusing on either rescuing or accumulating animals, forming deep attachments and losing the ability to part with them even if the animals are deceased (Avery, 2005).

Viewing one's possessions as central to one's identity is common with hoarders. Hoarders often face grief and loss when possessions are lost or taken. So extreme can be these feelings of grief and loss that animal hoarders may keep the dead animals near them to alleviate the symptoms of grief. Approximately 60% of animal hoarders were found with dead animals in their possession (Patronek, 1999).

Finally, the majority of animal hoarders lead solitary lives. Embarrassment of their living conditions causes some to isolate from family and friends. Others may lead social lives while keeping their home life a secret. Worth & Beck (1981) noted social isolation is often a consequence of hoarding, not the cause.

Why hoard?

Common defenses used by hoarders

Like victims of many obsessive or dangerous behaviors, hoarders may go to extreme lengths, often compromising other aspects of their lives, to maintain their pathological hoarding behavior. Justifications and excuses used by hoarders are plentiful. Maintaining a positive self-image and self-esteem are crucial for hoarders to validate their behavior. As their self-esteem is threatened, a larger effort is often made to rationalize the situation. The reason for arguments slowly shifts from normal to pathological as one faces greater threat to self-esteem.

Vaca-Guzman and Arluke (2005) analyzed the justifications used by hoarders in 163 cases. Individuals accepted responsibility, but then denied it as harmful or negative. Denial, one of the most primitive defense mechanisms, can help hoarders dismiss their actions as odd or harmful by rejecting any implications. One hoarder claimed he cleaned up after his 27 dogs and 47 cats living in a loft at least once a day. When the filth and stench

were brought to his attention, his response was to deny the animals' waste as his problem but to report that animals mark their territory (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke, 2005, p. 3).

Hoarders supported their denial with their explanations that the animals in fact had the opposite experience, often claiming that they loved the situation they were in. One hoarder with 37 emaciated dogs noted, "This is heaven for them" (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke, 2005, p. 343). Treating animals as family, naming them, and professing love for them were used as a justification for having them. Extreme grandiosity can be witnessed in some hoarders, who see themselves as a "Good Samaritan," saving animals from death. Hoarders may personify themselves as saviors by claiming a need to rescue animals. Although the hoarders' environment may be less than ideal for an animal, in their mind the setting may lessen the harm of death and provide a noble and purposeful cause. Arguments of keeping animals from death allow hoarders to justify their behavior of animal neglect. Death is not seen as an option by hoarders who believe they are "saving" the animals from this fate. Altruistic beliefs allow hoarders to believe they should be admired for their commitment to animals.

Berry, Patronek & Lockwood (2005) found nine cases of hoarders identifying themselves as the head of rescue groups or sanctuaries. Life, even though appalling, is seen as a better option. A man with a Rottweiler and 64 pit bulls claimed "I took care of dogs people were trying to kill" (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke, 2005, p. 345). Often, hoarders may view themselves as being targeted by authorities who did not understand their plight to save animals.

In some cases, partial responsibility of hoarders was softened through excuses and rationalizations. Animal hoarders who may have accepted the reality of the situation, while denying or deflecting complete responsibility, often used excuses. They felt credit should be given for things they did well to negate their hoarding behavior. They rationalized that it is difficult for anyone to care for numerous animals and that often the situation "got out of hand" (Vaca-Guzman & Arluke, 2005, p. 347). Scapegoating, shifting blame away from oneself and onto another, was found in 15.4% of Vaca-Guzman and Arluke's (2005) cases. Hoarders blamed the lack of community resources for homeless animals, owners who abandon or lose their pets, and those who bring animals to them unsolicited. Some hoarders reported mental, physical, and economic problems. Hoarders often claimed they were not responsible for their behavior because their feelings for the animals transcended their will.

Clinical Models for Understanding the Etiology of Animal Hoarding

With research of hoarding behavior still in its infancy, numerous psychiatric models have been suggested as ways to explain, diagnose, and treat the behavior. They include the delusional, dementia, addictions, zoophilia (where animals provide sexual gratification), attachment, and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) models.

The delusional model (Frost, 2000) explains hoarders as believing they hold special powers to communicate and/or empathize with animals (p. 2). The delusional model also recognizes the failure of hoarders to acknowledge that the animals were not getting appropriate care. Delusions may also include reality-based paranoia towards animal control authorities.

Another approach to understanding the etiology of animal hoarding is its potential relationship with dementia (Patronek, 1999). Dementia is a cognitive impairment involving an individual's judgments, communication, coordination, and memory. Patronek (1999) suggested a high prevalence of animal hoarders are placed in a residential facility or under guardianship (26%), and that the individuals showed no insight into the irrationality of their behavior.

Hoarding has also been explained as a form of addictive behavior. A person with addictive behavior is unable to control their dependence on a particular substance or activity. Preoccupation with the animals, denial of the problem, rationalization for the behavior, social segregation, and both environmental and personal neglect are symptoms of addictive behavior (Lockwood, 1994). Hoarding of possessions can be associated with gambling (Meagher et al., 1999) and compulsive shopping (Frost et al., 1998).

Early developmental deprivation of human attachment offers an alternative approach to explain animal hoarding. Hoarders who faced neglect, absent, or abusive caregivers as children may turn to animals for unconditional love. Transferring one's attachment to animals can be safer than trusting other humans and the stability offered by animals can bring a sense of emotional stability (Worth and Beck, 1981). Hoarding becomes pathological when an increasing number of animals are needed to fill the void of attachment.

Congruent with many issues in our mental health system, the explanation most often associated with hoarding behavior is a medical model, which identifies the problem as a psychiatric condition. Individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder may have "an overwhelming sense of responsibility for preventing imagined harm

to animals, and they engage in unrealistic steps to fulfill this responsibility” (Frost, 2000, p. 3). Patronek (1999) noted more than 80% of animal hoarders also hoarded inanimate items, indicative of a diagnosis of OCD. Compulsive hoarding can be described as an individual who alleviates their anxiety by continually acquiring animals or objects without any satisfaction. Individuals feel compelled to repeat their hoarding knowing that it will only be a temporary reprieve for them.

One must first understand the underlying issues behind the animal hoarding to successfully address the issue. The hoarding of animals can be viewed as a symptom, or outcome, of a disorder. The core of hoarding may be traced back to a myriad of other “defined” psychiatric diagnoses.

Interdisciplinary Interventions with Animal Hoarding Cases

Perhaps the most comprehensive, effective intervention enlists the use of an interdisciplinary group of professionals to address the broad problems of animal hoarding on the micro- and macrolevel. Involving human health and social services, housing authorities, legislators, community health professionals, and animal welfare professionals in an integrated approach addresses the numerous concerns of hoarding. Task force members addressing multiple concerns such as animal welfare, child abuse and neglect, animal abuse and neglect, housing issues, and healthcare have greater leverage when confronting the problem than if working separately, or neglecting one aspect while focusing on another.

Both the Dane County (WI) Task Force (1999-2000) and New York City (NY) Task Force (2003-2004) have interdisciplinary approaches in place to facilitate interaction between professionals and hoarders. A cross training manual published by the Humane Society of the United States and the Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Disability and Elder Services Bureau of Aging and Long Term Care Resources (2003) provides information on companion animals, exploitation, self-neglect, and elder abuse. Its focus is to have animal protection and adult protective services agencies collaborate to strengthen communities.

According to Handy (1994), humane societies often use different types of interventions. One intervention is the cooperative approach that encourages the hoarder to voluntarily relinquish some animals. Hoarders may also choose to spay or neuter any animals they keep. Another intervention involves limiting the number of animals one may keep through a court order with ongoing monitoring.

In summary, interdisciplinary groups need to

coordinate services for animals, hoarders, and the community. The members each have a role to play in the group and must work collaboratively while allowing each member to focus on their specialty.

Social Work Implications

There are specific implications for both social work practice and policy. By understanding animal hoarding, professionals will be able to better recognize the pervasiveness of the problem and offer appropriate treatment. With research on hoarders being in its infancy, few mental health treatment standards have been developed. Following, the author will discuss some general principles of treatment that will be helpful in working with animal hoarders.

Social workers may come directly in contact with hoarders as a clinical referral. The importance of the therapeutic alliance, the empathic relationship formed through interactions between the therapist and client, cannot be understated. The real relationship, a genuine connection between the client and therapist, is necessary to have in place before the therapist and client can work purposely together.

Strategies have been noted for becoming more connected and comfortable working with hoarders. Nathanson, (as cited by Cook-Daniels, 2002) noted that social workers should take something they are familiar with, such as self-neglect or crisis intervention, and apply it to working with hoarders. Developing trust may be difficult for an individual who hides their hoarding and denies the problem. The hoarder may have significance transference reactions to the therapist. A hoarder’s feeling of a general mistrust of authorities is a problem social workers must understand and expect when working with hoarders. Being mandated to attend counseling may also lead to resentment toward the social worker. It can take years for some clients to fully understand their problem and be willing to make changes.

Social workers must continually assess their countertransference, the therapist’s feelings in reaction to the experiences, emotions, or problems when working with hoarders. Many professionals are unable to be sympathetic with animal hoarders for a variety of reasons including misinformation, lack of information, or personal feelings on the issue. Individuals who try to intervene need to be aware of their own emotional responses to obtain an appropriate perspective. Social workers may become emotionally reactive not only to the client, but to the animals. Therapists need to remember that they are treating the individual who hoards animals, and not rescuing the hoarded animals. Therapists must also continually engage in reflective practice in which they explore

the natural process of countertransference.

On the macrolevel, social workers must also advocate for this clinical population. The current policies on animal hoarding mandate the hoarder to pay for their own psychological treatment and sheltering of any seized animals. These policies may deter individuals with little funds to seek treatment. Social workers need to advocate on behalf of hoarders who may not be able to afford the legal process currently in place. Also, educating the media, other professionals, and the community about the problem of hoarding is necessary if social workers aim to make any progress in addressing this problem. Lauren Joniaux (as cited in Handy, 1994) noted that one must remember the individuals and the reasons why they hoard instead of strictly enforcing laws.

Conclusion

Animal hoarding is an insidious problem affect-

ing numerous community agencies. Both animals and humans face neglect at the hands of hoarders. This article is intended to expose social workers to a topic that is rarely discussed or studied. Limitations of the article are noted as it was not possible to cover any of the sections of animal hoarding in depth, but rather to expose the breadth of the problem.

Unfortunately, the study of treatment options used with hoarders is minimal: It is difficult to treat a problem that has only recently been acknowledged by professionals. Social workers must convey the seriousness of animal hoarders to other professionals while continuing to advocate on behalf of the hoarder. Hoarding with continue to be addressed with hit-and-miss solutions until the problem of animal hoarding is recognized as a serious mental health issue. Social workers must take the lead in educating the public about the problem and advocating that hoarders receive the best treatment options and services available.

Anne Fleury received her MSW from Loyola in 2007. She became interested in hoarding after visiting a hoarder's house. She plans to continue educating others about animal hoarding and its numerous implications.

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