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Animal Cruelty and the Sadism of Everyday Life

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*



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Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

Animal Cruelty and the Sadism of Everyday Life

New studies shed light on the psychology of animal cruelty.

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Once, while rambling around in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I stumbled upon a small oil painting by Annibale Carracci, a 16th century Italian artist. Aptly named *Two Children Teasing a Cat*, the painting portrays a smiling boy, a young girl, and an orange cat. The scene looks completely innocent until you realize that the boy is holding the cat with his left hand and has large crayfish in his right hand. And he has successfully provoked the crayfish into clamping one of his massive claws onto one of the cat's ears.

What should we make of such wanton cruelty in children? It is a childish prank or sign of deep-seated psychopathology that will someday erupt into far worse violence against people? Researchers who study human-animal interactions are divided over the causes and consequences of animal cruelty. Many anthrozoologists argue childhood animal cruelty is a good predictor of later violence against humans. Others, however, believe that the link between animal cruelty in children and adult violence is not very strong. For example, contrary to popular opinion, most serial killers and school shooters do not have documented history of animal abuse. Further, childhood animal abuse is surprisingly common in the general population. A review of two dozen research reports found that 35% of violent offenders had been animal abusers when they were kids—but so had 37% of men in the non-criminal “normal” control group.

But why do some people and not others pull the wings off butterflies, toss firecrackers at cats, and shoot the neighbors' dogs with BB guns? Two recent studies shed light on this question. Both of them explore the relationship between animal abuse and a configuration of psychological traits called “The Dark Triad.”

The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad consists of three personality characteristics—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Using an Internet sample, Phillip Kavanagh, Tania Signal, and Nik Taylor examined the relationship between the Dark Triad variables and attitudes towards animal abuse and self-reported acts of animal cruelty. They found that psychopathy (a trait characterized by selfishness, lack of remorse, and impulsivity) was related to intentionally hurting or torturing animals, as was a composite measure of all three Dark Triad traits. However, the relationships were fairly weak. Could another personality trait also help explain why some people and not others delight in animal cruelty?

“No Bugs Were Harmed In the Making of This Experiment”

According to an article recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*, the answer is “yes” and the trait is sadism. The research was dreamed up by Dan Jones at the University of British Columbia (now at the University of Texas at El Paso). The experiment was, as my former psychology teacher Howard Polio used to say, “so good it makes your teeth hurt.”

The researchers constructed a bug crunching machine designed to give cheap thrill to latent sadists. The bug-cruncher was a modified coffee grinder with a tube attached to the top where you could drop live bugs. When a bug was dumped into the machine, the device would make a gruesome crunching sound. The animals used in the study were three pill bugs named Muffin, Tootsie, and Ike. About the size of coffee beans, pill bugs are actually crustaceans and more related to lobsters than true insects (here). Sometimes called roly-polis, pill bugs are cute (sort of), and are sometimes even kept as children’s pets. To enhance their likability, each bug was placed in an individual cup labeled with its name.

After being told the researchers were studying “personality and tolerance for challenging jobs,” the participants completed a battery of questionnaires. These included a measure of the three Dark Triad variables and a scale designed to measure individual differences in sadistic tendencies (ex., “I have fantasies which involve hurting people.”). They were then told they had to conduct one of four noxious tasks. They could either kill live bugs by dropping them into the crunching machine, help the experimenter kill bugs, clean a dirty toilet, or place their hand in ice cold water (very painful). If a subject chose to kill bugs, they had to actually drop at least one of the bugs into the cruncher. At the end of the experiment, the participants were asked to rate how much pleasure they got from participating in the study.

(Note that subjects who opted to clean the toilet or to put their hand in ice water were stopped before they started the task. And my animal activist pals will be happy to learn that none of the pillbugs were injured in the study—a hidden barrier prevented them from coming into contact with the crusher blades.)

The Sadism of Everyday Life

Did any of the subjects choose to kill Muffin, Tootsie, or Ike? Yes. Twenty-seven percent of them personally dropped bugs into the crusher, and another 27% choose to help the experimenter kill the bugs. Were the personalities of the bug killers different from the other subjects? Yes. The bug killers had the higher sadism scores than the other groups. Further, the bug killers could either stop at Muffin, or they could also, for kicks, toss Ike and/or Tootsie into the machine. The researchers found that bug killers with high levels of sadism reported they got more pleasure from their dastardly deeds than non-killers. And, as you might expect, the more pleasure the subjects got out of crunching animals, the more bugs they killed.

The most interesting aspect of the study (other than the creativity of the design and the fact that a quarter of college students opted to kill Muffin, Ike or Tootsie), was that a statistical analysis revealed that sadism was a bigger factor in predicting animal cruelty than the Dark Triad

Variables. I emailed Erin Buckels the lead author of the article, to confirm this. “Yes,” she wrote. “It’s sadism and not the Dark Triad that’s at work here.”

The UB-C research team believes that the Dark Triad is actually the Dark Tetrad of personality; they want to throw everyday sadism into the mix of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. They may be right. You can see it in the Carracci painting. Look at the little girl’s smile as she watches the boy torture the kitty.