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Animal Hoarding by Humans: A Literature Review

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Abstract

I review the origin and treatment of animal-hoarding disorder in humans and its relation to hoarding disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, showing that it seems to be more closely related to object hoarding. The disorder often originates in a traumatic life event, which triggers a psychological vulnerability to compulsively collect animals. In some cases, the hoarding individual was neglected by parental figures at a young age and developed relationships with animals in order to cope with the neglect. Some theories that proposed to explain the neglectful behavior in animal hoarding include dissociation, delusion, and dementia, viewing the animals as self-objects, or viewing them as extensions of themselves. I also consider recommended treatments for animal hoarders.

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Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by intrusive thoughts, images, or urges (obsessions) that the sufferer actively tries to avoid with actions aimed to suppress and to provide relief from the intrusion (compulsions) (Barlow, & Durand, 2015). The subtypes of OCD include symmetry, which is discomfort with misalignment or disarray, forbidden thoughts or actions, contamination and cleaning, and hoarding.

Hoarding is the least common subtype of OCD and is characterized by the compulsive need to collect items and difficulty in discarding anything because of its potential future use or sentimental value. The hoarded material may fill most of the affected individual's residence and may cause significant distress, reduced functioning, or both because of the excessive amounts of clutter sufferers collect. The symptoms must persist for at least six months to be diagnosed as hoarding disorder (Andrews-McClymon, Lilienfeld, & Duke, 2013).

The hoarding of animals is characterized by collecting animals in such numbers that the hoarder can no longer maintain even minimal standards of personal hygiene, let alone take care of the animals (Gahr, Connemann, Freudenmann, Kolle, & Schonfeldt-Lecuona, 2014). Animal hoarders are usually unaware of the problems produced by hoarding. Between 700 and 2,000 cases of animal hoarding are reported every year, but the prevalence may be increasing. Because hoarders are typically reclusive and socially isolated, many cases go undetected (Nathanson, 2009).

Symptomatology

Approximately 76% of animal hoarders are female and the median onset of hoarding occurs in late adulthood (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). The most commonly hoarded animals are dogs. Other commonly hoarded animals include horses, birds, and cats. It is not uncommon for an individual to hoard more than one type of animal (Joffe, O'Shannessy, Dhand, Westman, & Fawcett, 2014). The median number of hoarded animals is 39, but it is not uncommon for the number to exceed 100 (Nathanson, 2009). Consequently, squalid living conditions are common, including extreme filth, pests, mold, precarious debris, animal excrement, non-functioning bathrooms and other living spaces, clutter, and animal carcasses (Andrews-McClymon

et al., 2013; Nathanson, 2009). Those with this disorder often continue to compulsively collect animals despite the incapacity to provide for them. The hoarded animals often suffer disease, starvation, and death; however, the hoarder is often unaware of the animals' hunger or pain and may become defensive if criticized for deficits in caregiving (Brown, 2011; Campos-Lima et al., 2014).

The neglect that typifies this disorder is not necessarily intentional. In fact, hoarders often report a deep attachment to their animals, considering them to be like children (Campos-Lima et al., 2014). Rather, their neglect may be because the hoarders neglect themselves as well as their animals, thereby possibly reflecting comorbid personality disorders (Arluke, Frost, Luke, Messner, Nathanson, & Patronek, 2002; Nathanson, 2009).

Animal Hoarding and Object Hoarding

Animal hoarders generally find it difficult to relinquish their animals and, in many cases, form attachments that impair personal functioning (Barlow & Durand, 2015). Object hoarders find it difficult to discard anything, even if it has no real sentimental value or use, such as food wrappings, to the point that it overtakes their living space, rendering it unlivable. In both animal hoarding and object hoarding, the affected individuals may not realize that they have a problem until they are confronted by public-health authorities, often following a report from a family member or neighbor. Unlike animal hoarders, object hoarders typically exhibit Axis I and Axis II personality disorders while animal hoarders only show the latter (Frost, Patronek, & Rosenfield, 2011). Thus, they share relationship difficulties, deviant personalities, and social dysfunction, such as reclusiveness. They typically live alone. Notable differences between animal and object hoarding include early onset of the latter, usually occurring in childhood or early adolescence, while animal hoarding usually begins in adulthood (Frost et al., 2011). Animal hoarders also tend to live in distinctly more unsanitary conditions, which is not necessarily the case for object hoarders. Instead, they are threatened by safety incidents of obstruction, unstable stacking, or other arrangements of hoarded items.

The methods of hoarding are also different. Object hoarders may spend compulsively or collect free or discarded items. Animal

hoarders collect their pets either actively or passively (Frost et al., 2011). Sometimes they develop a reputation for accepting unwanted animals or fail to spay or neuter those they hoard, so they multiply through uncontrolled breeding. They acquire some of their animals by taking in lost animals they find, adopting them, or finding them through ads and notices. In some cases, they advertise themselves as animal shelters or rescue groups.

Animal Hoarding's Relation to OCD

Symptomatology

It is difficult to define animal hoarding as a single disorder because it may, in fact, result from the confluence of several pathologies (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Some researchers have asked whether animal hoarding is a subtype of hoarding disorder and not similar to OCD. According to Campos-Lima et al. (2014), animal hoarding and OCD share an excessive felt responsibility and anxiety that something terrible will happen if they do not follow through. However, in the case of animal hoarding, the anxiety may not be unfounded if the animals will be euthanized otherwise.

Campos-Lima and colleagues (2014) studied 16 patients diagnosed as animal hoarders in a clinic treating OCD and found that the two groups differed substantially. For example, the patients diagnosed with OCD presented obsessions that caused anxiety, fear, or shame and actively sought to resist or avoid such emotions by compulsive actions. Animal hoarders welcomed such emotions as motives for their hoarding. Moreover, patients diagnosed as animal hoarders did not respond to treatments for OCD treatment. And in fact, patients diagnosed with OCD rarely present the symptoms of animal hoarding, suggesting that they are not closely related.

Etiology

The onset of animal hoarding is often preceded by a traumatic life event such as physical or sexual abuse in which something was taken from the individual by force or in the loss of a stabilizing relationship or the advent of a serious health issue (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). If the individual already has a vulnerability to a personality disorder, a severely stressful event will have greater effect. Animals have a soothing effect on their hoarders, especially if the animals are

perceived as focusing on the hoarder, alert to nonverbal cues and present to listen to them, so they may rely on them after a stressful event.

One theory to explain the origins of animal hoarding is that animals serve as self-objects for the hoarder, thereby stabilizing the hoarder's sense of self (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). The animals fulfill a psychological need such as vitalization or support, so they feel the animals are essential to them or even their primary reason for life. Despite this attachment, the hoarder may view the animals as being there to meet the hoarder's own needs instead of the other way around and consequently feel no responsibility to care for them.

Another theory proposed by Patronek and Nathanson (2009) is that hoarders may view their animals as extensions of themselves instead of separate beings, so they are unable to empathize with them or understand that they have needs of their own. Because the hoarder usually neglects himself or herself, he or she does so with the animals, which may explain why they do not see the animals' poor state of health (see, also, Brown, 2011). It is also possible that animal hoarders experience dissociation, that is, they live in an alternative reality and are insensitive to the degradation in their personal lives and those of their animals. There is also evidence for frontal lobe dysfunction in animal hoarders, which may result in lack of empathy and inhibition, leading to neglect of their animals (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Reinisch (2008) proposed an addiction-based model of animal hoarding based on hoarders' preoccupation with animals, their denial of having a problem, and making excuses for their condition. Impulse control is impaired in hoarders, similar to addicts: they compulsively acquire more animals even though they cannot provide for them. Other theories of its origins include a dementia model because they lack the empathy or insight to recognize poor conditions and a delusional disorder because of their belief that they have a special ability to understand and care for their animals; they claim their animals are well-cared for despite obvious neglect, showing they have unrealistic perception.

Treating Animal Hoarding

Most states in the US have anti-cruelty laws mandating that owners of animals provide sufficient food, water, and shelter

for them. Because animal hoarders do provide some level of all three requirements, although insufficient, it may be convenient for governmental agencies to turn a blind eye (Berry, Patronek, & Lockwood, 2005). Social-services and mental-health agencies may be similarly unresponsive (Arluke, Frost, Luke, Messner, Nathanson, & Patronek, 2002). Even when legal authorities deal with the situation, they may naively assume that the problem ends when the animals are removed, but the rate of repeat offenses is nearly 100% if no longer-term arrangement is in place to address the underlying problems (Berry et al., 2005). Mandatory therapy has become more common as a condition for probation after receiving a sentence of animal cruelty, but authorities may not follow-up to ensure these conditions are met, and, as there is no established treatment for persons diagnosed as animal hoarders, therapists may deal with the disorder ineffectively (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009).

Although little is known about successful treatment for animal hoarders, social therapy and cognitive-behavioral interventions such as those used for object hoarding disorder have been recommended as components of a multidisciplinary approach (Barlow & Durand, 2015; Castrodale et al., 2010; Gahr et al., 2014; Kress, Stargell, Zoldan, & Paylo, 2016). Since animal hoarders often have comorbid disorders, cognitive behavioral treatment may have more success if these are treated simultaneously (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). Arluke and colleagues (2002) suggested that, because of the high rate of recidivism associated with removing all of the hoarded animals, hoarders might be allowed to keep a small number of them if they consent to spaying or neutering the animals and to regular monitoring to ensure better standards of care.

Conclusion

I have described the existing literature on animal hoarding. Its characteristics are more closely related to the general hoarding disorder than to OCD (Campos-Lima et al. , 2014). The lack of effective clinical treatments for animal hoarders is problematic because its prevalence may be increasing (Nathanson, 2009). Developing effective treatments will reduce recidivism and promote the health and well-being of hoarders and animals alike.

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