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ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES and ANIMAL WELFARE: SHOULD ANIMAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT BE ASSESSED DURING ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES SCREENING?

Abstract

Past research has examined links among animal abuse, child maltreatment, and intimate partner violence and demonstrated the importance of addressing the needs of both human and animal victims. We hypothesized that there might be a similar link between animal abuse and older adult welfare issues but could not identify any empirical research that linked them. As a first step in the earlier research was the development of a screening protocol that shed light on the link between domestic violence and animal abuse, we decided to follow that same route to explore this new topic. Here we report the results of a national survey of state Adult Protective Agencies regarding their protocols for assessing animal welfare issues in the context of older adult maltreatment. We also describe a model assessment protocol we developed in collaboration with the Utah Division of Aging and Adult Services.

“Her decision to go to the hospital depended on what happened to her cat. Her recovery depended on the cat’s well being. So I had to find someone to care for her cat. I never thought that animal welfare would be part of my job!” (Adult Protection Services case worker, cited in Boat and Knight [2000], p. 149)

“Another client lived with an abusive son but was afraid to go to a shelter for fear that her son would kill her cats.” (Boat and Knight [2000], p. 151)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, research attention to the overlap among animal maltreatment, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence has led to the recognition of a connection between domestic violence and animal cruelty (Faver & Strand, 2003). One practical outcome of such research is the availability of assessment protocols to measure dimensions of animal welfare and animal abuse in the context of child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (Ascione, 2007). A second outcome was the hypothesis that there might be a similar connection between animal cruelty and elder abuse. A literature search on this topic was completed (May 29, 2007) using the PsychINFO/Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection databases. In the earlier research, searches for “child abuse” and “domestic violence” yielded 54 and 46 citations, respectively, when cross-referenced with animal welfare/abuse topics. But, when “elder abuse” or “elder maltreatment” or “abuse of the elderly” were cross-referenced with “cruelty to animals,” “cruel to animals,” “animal

abuse,” “pet abuse,” or “animal welfare,” only one citation was retrieved -- Boat and Knight, 2000. Similar empirical research on animal welfare and abuse issues related to the needs of abused elder adults or other vulnerable adults could not be found (Cook-Daniels, 1999; Rosen, 1995).

In order to rectify this lack of information, we designed a project¹ to develop and field test an assessment protocol that might shed light on animal welfare and animal abuse factors related to the challenges to serving the needs of elder and vulnerable adults.² This endeavor reflects the belief that accurate screening and risk assessment protocols are the first crucial step to effective intervention (Wolfe, 2003). In fact, in the earlier research, development of an accurate assessment protocol was essential to the exploration of the connection between domestic violence and animal abuse issues. The goal of the current research is to use a similar assessment protocol to promote accurate tabulation of information on animal welfare and animal abuse issues implicated in cases of abuse of elder adults and vulnerable adults in Utah. This type of tabulation would be the first of its kind in the U.S. and it is hoped that this approach will become a model for such assessments.

Prior to the development of an assessment protocol, we decided to survey all 50 states to determine what, if anything, other states were doing to explore

¹We thank the Kenneth A. Scott Charitable Trust for support of this work and the respondents who completed our survey.

²Project activities are conducted with the collaboration and cooperation of the Utah Division of Adult & Aging Services and Utah Adult Protective Services.

whether animal welfare and animal abuse issues might be involved in elder abuse cases brought to the attention of Adult Protective Services in their states. We developed a brief phone survey and a research assistant contacted Adult Protective Service representatives in each state. This paper reports on those findings from the Adult Protective Services state respondents.

PROJECT CONTEXT

Few data exist on pet ownership among older adults nor on how pet ownership might be related to demographic and health variables. One recent survey reported that older single individuals (one adult more than 65 years of age) have a pet ownership rate of 29.7% (Wise, 2002). A similar survey restricted to older adults in the state of Utah reported 35.7% pet ownership for adults 55 years of age and older (Mason, Peak, Krannich, & Sanderson, 2002). Pet ownership information is not included in the U.S. Census, however, a conservative estimate is that one in three older adults has companion animals. In 2006, there were an estimated 37,125,412 adults aged 65 years and older in the U.S., 12.4% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts). By 2020 and 2040, projections for the number of adults older than 65 years of age are 54,632,000 and 80,049,000, respectively; in 2040, older adults are projected to comprise 20.4% of the U.S. population. A conservative pet ownership rate of 30% means that roughly 16 million pets could reside in older adults' homes in 2020 and 24 million in 2040.

The prevalence of elder abuse in the U.S. can only be approximated. The most recent national survey, gathered during fiscal year 2003 (Teaster, Dugar, Mendiondo, Abner, Cecil & Otto, 2006), suggests that 381,430 cases of elder abuse (adults 60 years of age or older) were reported to Adult Protective Services agencies or representatives. Utah's elder abuse reporting rate of 5.53 per 1,000 is close to the national median of 5.7 per 1,000. The most recent data for Adult Protective Services in Utah reports annual investigations of approximately 2,400 allegations of abuse and/or neglect and/or exploitation of older adults and that, typically, about 30% of the cases have merit (Lyon, 2009).

An obstacle to prevalence estimation, however, is lack of agreement on the operational definition of elder abuse which affects eligibility for protective services, service program design, and the risk of criminal prosecution (Nerenberg, 2008). The categories of abuse used by the National Center on Elder Abuse include financial abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, self-neglect, and abandonment but there are other possible options such as abduction (Nerenberg, 2008). Despite what seems like a wide array of choices, the National Center on Elder Abuse does not include any category of abuse that includes animal welfare. However, it is of interest to note that in Teaster, et al. (2006) one of the three vignettes used to introduce the report is the case of a 76 year old man whose "three underfed dogs bark incessantly" (p. 8). Despite the fact that the survey used by Teaster, et al. includes animal control personnel as potential informants about elder abuse,

issues related to pets do not appear in any other parts of the report. Also absent in that report is any empirical research on how often animal abuse occurs in the context of elder abuse.

When 200 Adult Protection Services professionals in 40 states were asked about their experiences with pet abuse issues (Raymond, 2003), 35% of the respondents indicated that older adults described pets being threatened or harmed, 92% suggested that older adult self-neglect may co-occur with neglect of pets, and 75% reported that pet-welfare issues complicated the process of providing services to older adults (e.g., older adults refusing relocation if their pets were not allowed to accompany them). However, despite those responses, only 35% of Adult Protective Services professionals reported that their agencies included pet-related questions on their assessment forms and less than 25% maintained a policy dealing with suspected animal abuse (Raymond, 2003).

In contrast to the issue of animal abuse, the positive role of companion animals in the lives of older adults has received research attention. For example, Peretti (1990) examined the friendship status of dogs in a sample of older adults 64 to 82 years of age and Peretti and Majecen (1991) suggested that emotionally-abused older adults may turn to their companion animals for solace. Smith, Seibert, Jackson, and Snell (1992) explored concerns of older adults about housing that permits pets, about providing food and veterinary care for companion animals, and about planning for cases where older adults may predecease their pets. Additional research focused on the potential therapeutic

value of companion animals (e.g. Barry, 1984; Banks & Banks, 2002; Kramer, Friedmann, & Bernstein, 2009).

As for the physical effects of pet ownership, companion animals may influence physical health in a positive direction (Friedman, Thomas, Cook, Tsai, & Picot, 2007) and may also be associated with negative outcomes. For example, Parslow, et al. (2005) examined this issue in a large sample of older adults age 60-64 in Australia and found that pet ownership was associated with negative health outcomes including more depressive symptoms, more physical health problems, and higher use of pain medications compared to older adults without pets. In addition, Kurrle, Day, and Cameron (2004) studied a small sample of cases where older (at least 75 years of age) adults' fall-related injuries could be attributed to pets in the home.

Other negative outcomes to pet ownership include that the desire for companion animals can reach the point of pathology as in animal hoarding. When older adults are the animal hoarders, self-neglect is a common accompaniment to the maltreatment of the animals involved. In cases that do involve older adult hoarders, appropriate intervention may depend on the auspices of the responding agency, e.g. Adult Protective Services, law enforcement, community mental health, animal welfare, or public health agencies. Not every responder recognizes that the animal hoarding is a symptom and not the end problem and may not address or even recognize that the underlying situation may involve a physical or psychological disorder

(Patronek, Loar, & Nathanson, 2006). Clearly, companion animals bring benefits to their owners but costs and other concerns also need to be addressed. Potentially confounding problematic issues need to be kept in mind when addressing animal abuse and neglect in the circumstance of maltreatment of older adults.

In the context of domestic violence, assessments of animal abuse did enhance understanding (Ascione, 2005, 2007) and facilitated the provision of needed services to victims (e.g. Safe Haven programs for pets of women who are battered [Ascione, 2000]). Since pets are often considered family members, it makes sense to include animal abuse among the indicators of family violence (Flynn, 2000). Pets have been used as weapons in domestic violence situations (DeVoe & Smith, 2002) to the point that concern for the safety of family pets has prevented some women in domestic violence situations from seeking shelter (Quinlisk, 1999). In fact, the American Humane Association is sponsoring an on-line site [www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/] that will accept pledges of support for national guidelines that would “promote on-site housing of pets at women’s shelters and to acknowledge the human-animal bond.” The past research that established a link between animal abuse and domestic violence did effect change in the way service providers interact with domestic violence victims. Assessment instruments now include questions about animal welfare issues and

service provision to victims of domestic violence has also been affected – witness the number of pet sheltering programs that now exist (Ascione, 2000)..

The previous body of evidence that linked animal welfare and domestic violence led to the current hypothesis that appropriate assessment of animal abuse in the context of elder abuse might similarly enhance understanding of the maltreatment of older adults and associated pet-welfare issues. A corollary to that hypothesis is that unaddressed animal-related concerns might present obstacles to appropriately responding to the needs of vulnerable older adults. Enhanced assessment options may also improve the prevalence estimates of the extent of animal abuse among older adults who own pets. A readily available screening and assessment protocol could assist community sentinels who come in contact with elder adults during the course of routine pet care (e.g. animal control officers, veterinarians, pet groomers). Teaster, et al., in their list of recommendations, include both a need for more accurate and standardized data collection and that “training on the identification of abuse should expand to groups heretofore not known as critical to prevention and intervention efforts” (p. 6). The screening and assessment protocols that have been developed for this project could address these recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

The screening and assessment tools developed for this project evaluate a variety of information currently thought to be useful in exploring the hypothesized link between animal welfare and elder abuse. For example,

- Number, types, and ages of pets owned.
- Health and well being of pets.
- Evaluation of older adults' cognitive, emotional, financial, and physical ability to control and provide care for pets.
- Determination if older adult self-neglect is related to inadequate animal care (e.g., evidence of hoarding of animals)
- Older adults' concern that they or others might harm their pets.
- Reports by older adults that their pets have been harmed or killed.
- Older adults' concerns about who will care for their pets when the older adult dies or relocates to an assisted-living or alternative care center or requires hospitalization.

Prior to the development of the screening and assessment instrument, a 50-state phone survey was implemented to find out what questions other states were asking (if any) about pets at any point in their interactions with or about older adults. A mailing list of appropriate respondents was generated from the National Center on Elder Abuse website (www.NCEA.AOA.gov) and preliminary letters that explained the process and research purpose were sent to Adult Protective Service agencies in each of the 50 states. The letters also introduced the research assistant and explained her level of participation.

In the follow-up phone calls, the research assistant introduced herself and asked the designated telephone respondent about any screening for animal-

welfare related issues that may occur in connection with Adult Protective Services or any other elder abuse screening. She then said:

“We are exploring whether there is a link between Pet or Companion Animal Welfare and Abuse and Elder Maltreatment and Neglect. Earlier you should have received a letter describing our project and soliciting your assistance in a brief survey. I would like to ask you a few questions about your Screening and Assessment Processes.”

Respondents were promised confidentiality and anonymity and were assured that only aggregate data from respondents would be reported. The research assistant then asked each respondent seven questions which are listed in Table 1. Five questions related to the research topic and two asked about the respondent’s level of interest in receiving any follow-up information.

Insert Table 1 here

SURVEY RESULTS

Forty-one states responded to this telephone survey (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

As can be seen from the results shown in Table 2, at most, states do little more than ask if pets are present in the home. Of the states that do ask about pets, only one asks about pet/elder-related concerns. Included in that state’s

assessments are three questions that specifically pertain to the issue being explored:

- Do you think your partner/child is using your love of your pet to control you?
- Are you with an individual who is abusing you/harming your pet?
- If you wanted to leave, how can you/we make sure your animal is safe during your leaving?

Four other states said that, although they did not currently screen for this issue, they all thought it was important. Despite that lack of official inclusion on state-generated forms, respondents were quite interested in the topic and wanted to chat about it. One said, “I don’t know why we don’t ask [about pets], it seems very important because pets are a big part of an elder’s life.”

Even states without an explicit pet-related question collect anecdotal information. Both if states did or did not include a pet-related question on their official state form, individual Adult Protective Services workers would add information to the form or note something that concerned them. For example, workers will note the presence of a dangerous animal as a safety-related issue for other workers or note a specific pet-related concern raised by a client.

Beyond the yes/no responses included in the telephone survey, there were qualitative responses that covered a wide variety of topics. For example, in answer to Question 2 (“In your screening process for elder abuse, do you ask if pets are present in the home?”), safety concerns appeared to be paramount.

The presence or absence of dangerous animals might be noted at the same time and for the same reason that workers might note a weapon. In response to Question 3 (“Do you ask any questions concerning pet abuse or animal welfare in general?”), several states answered that Adult Protective Services workers are free to raise the issue of abuse if they see signs of it. On the other hand, another respondent said that pet abuse by itself would not be noted unless it appeared to be connected to abuse or exploitation of the older adult.

In response to Question 4 (“Do you ask any question about other pet welfare issues an older adult might have?”), comments indicated that, even if the question is not asked, the client may bring up a pet-related concern and if a client asks for some kind of assistance, the Adult Protective Services workers will try to provide the help or find the information necessary to solve the problem. For example, if a client needs alternate housing, the worker would try to generate a list of pet-friendly housing options. In response to Question 5 (“Besides your screening protocol, are pet/companion animal issues included in any other protocols or assessments used by your agency?”), respondents said that if there are signs of animal hoarding, the local humane society would be notified and included in future negotiations with the client.

All respondents (100%) requested a copy of the survey results and assessment protocols.

According to the qualitative responses from the telephone survey participants, the three most frequent pet-related concerns noted by Adult

Protective Services workers were: an elder's inability to manage his/her pets, older adults spending money on their pets instead of themselves, and the lack of a safe place for pets to stay during emergency situations or natural disasters. Because of several recent natural disasters, e.g. Hurricane Katrina, the last of these concerns, no "safe haven" for pets appears to be receiving both more news coverage and more constructive reaction. It is now commonplace to see media attention paid to the issue of safe disposition of pets during a wide variety of emergency situations (e.g. fires, floods, housing crises). In fact, as one response to the negative publicity surrounding the lack of official planning for pets and pet owners following Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana has passed a law that requires acceptance of pets in shelters and other states are working on changing their own laws.

DISCUSSION

The title of this paper asks if animal welfare issues should be assessed during adult protective services screening. The ultimate goal of any screening tool for elder abuse is to generate useful information, information that can improve how we help older adults who may be victims of abuse (Stein, 2006). To do that we need to know more – more about victims, more about perpetrators, more about risk factors, and more about potential solutions to complex situations (Nerenberg, 2008). If the scope of assessment for elder abuse is broadened to include animal welfare interests, as we suggest here, important and potentially useful information may be added to our knowledge base. As Stein (2006) says,

“Any research ... is good research if It tells us something we didn’t know before or leads us to think about a new, interesting question or has implications for improving community services” (p. 702). After listening to survey respondents discuss older adults and animal welfare concerns, it appears that this issue is even more complex than the domestic violence and animal welfare concerns that generated it. Given the broad range of potential problems and limited range of potential solutions, a multifaceted assessment is essential; also essential is a collaborative approach that utilizes the problem-solving skills provided by a range of disciplines and multiple collaborators under the auspices of Adult Protective Services (Anetzberger, 2007; Nerenberg, 2008).

The initial goal for our phone survey of Adult Protective Services (APS) personnel was to ascertain what other states do (if anything) to assess animal welfare issues in the context of elder abuse. What we learned through the survey is the amorphous nature of assessment for an older and possibly frail population. There appears to be wide variation among the states in what they ask – recall that 51% do not ask anything pet-related at all – and in how they respond. If assessments include pet-related questions, it is not clear whether the focus should be concern specifically for the pet’s welfare or only as it relates to the welfare of its older adult owner.

This topic resonated with many of the APS telephone respondents. APS workers already fret about underfunding and non-reporting. Elder abuse is under-reported and not always recognized for what it is (Gross, 2006). It does not have

the same kind of public acknowledgment or established service structure as does child abuse (Payne, Appel & Kim-Appel, 2008). For example, how many people know how to locate a foster placement for an elder in need? Even experienced social workers may not realize that, in many jurisdictions, they are mandated to report elder abuse just as they are mandated to report child abuse. If a case of elder abuse is already complicated, adding concern for a pet or pets will not simplify the situation.

In domestic violence situations, the animal(s) can be used to coerce the victim(s). With reference to animal welfare and elder abuse, an extra complication is that there is some evidence that, on occasion, the older adult might be the perpetrator who inadvertently harms his/her pet(s). If the older adult is frail, isolated, or impaired in some way, or if there are other contributing physical or cognitive factors, he/she might be unable to care for his/her pet appropriately, and the animal(s) may suffer. An additional problematic issue is animal hoarding, where the hoarder is the perpetrator and also a victim and which can frequently involve older adults. In a typical animal hoarding incident, a socially-isolated individual will live with dozens to hundreds of dead and alive animals (HARC, 2002). In such cases, isolation is a key factor and removing a pet(s) from an elder's home to protect it may only solve the immediate situation but not the underlying problem. Since most states are not asking enough (or any) pet-related questions, any further exploration in that direction will be helpful. In

their qualitative responses, the APS phone survey respondents validated the need to learn more about a challenging problem.

Future Plan. As the next step, an assessment tool (see Appendix) has been developed that accomplish two goals. The two goals are to screen for and evaluate and then investigate any connection between animal welfare issues in the context of elder abuse. The instrument includes general questions about pet ownership, elder adults' characterizations of their relationships with pets, and any concerns that older adults might have about pet welfare. General screening questions are followed by more specific items that probe the particular concerns older adults might have about pet management, care, and welfare. For example, older adults are asked if they are concerned about who will care for their pets should they need to leave their home and if that concern has affected their decision making about receiving in-patient medical treatment.

In cases where animal abuse is reported or suspected, there is a follow up assessment instrument that collects even more detail regarding the nature of the abuse and the identity of the perpetrator of the abuse. This instrument is modeled on one developed by Ascione, et al. (2007) that has been successfully used in the context of domestic violence. Drafts of both instruments were reviewed by the Utah Division of Aging and Adult Services Agency Directors, its Safe Users Committee, and Adult Protective Services workers, and revised accordingly. A PowerPoint presentation developed by the principal investigators is available as a training device on how to use the assessment instrument and is

posted on the Division of Aging and Adult Services website and available to all users. Current versions of the assessment instruments and PowerPoint presentation are available at: <http://www.usu.edu/psychology/ascione/index.php>

The answer to the initial question asked above is yes. Yes, we need both more information and more types of information. If the ultimate goal is to achieve effective intervention in cases of elder abuse, then yes, we need to know more about this problem, its causes and effects. It is our hope that these enhanced assessment efforts will foster discussion and more research on how to appraise any relationship between elder adult maltreatment and animal welfare/abuse issues. Projections for demographic changes in the elder adult population in the U.S. as well as in other countries suggest that these issues will continue to be significant and challenging ones for the foreseeable future.

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Table 1: Telephone Survey Questions for Adult Protective Service Agencies

- 1 Are you comfortable with proceeding with this survey? Yes/No
- 2 In your screening process for elder abuse, do you ask if pets are present in the home? Yes/No.
If YES, do you ask about the kind(s) and number of pets?
- 3 Do you ask any questions concerning pet abuse or animal welfare in general? Yes/No
If YES, what is the wording of the question? Do you ask any additional or follow-up questions depending on the answers? Can you share the wording of these questions with us?
If NO, is there a reason for not including such a question?
- 4 Do you ask any questions about other pet welfare issues an elder adult might have (e.g., can't afford pet food/veterinary care, hard to exercise pet, pet has become difficult to control)? Yes/No.
If YES, can you share the wording of these questions?
- 5 Besides your screening protocol, are pet/companion animal issues included in any other protocols or assessments used by your agency, for example, investigation protocols? Yes/No.
If YES, can you share the nature of the protocol/assessments and the wording of the questions?
- 6 Would you like a copy of the survey report? Yes/No.
- 7 Would you like a copy of the assessment instrument? Yes/No.

Table 2: Adult Protective Services Telephone Survey Results

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| Question 1 asks if the respondent feels comfortable in proceeding. |
| Question 2: In your screening process for elder abuse, do you ask if pets are present in the home? Yes: 19 (46.3%) No: 22 (53.6%) |
| Question 2A: If YES, do you ask about the kind(s) and number of pets? Yes: 14 (73.7%) No: 5 (26.3%) |
| Question 3: Do you ask any questions concerning pet abuse or animal welfare in general? Yes: 5 (12.2%) No: 36 (87.8%) |
| Question 4: Do you ask any questions about other pet welfare issues an elder adult might have (e.g. can't afford pet food/veterinary care, hard to exercise pet, pet has become difficult to control)? Yes: 7 (17.1%) No: 34 (82.9%) |
| Question 5: Besides your screening protocol, are pet/companion animal issues included in any other protocols or assessments used by your agency – for example, investigation protocols? Yes: 12 (29.3%) No: 29 (70.7%) |