REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF HUMAN/ANIMAL ABUSE

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The concept of a link between human violence and animal violence is not new; people have been theorising and talking about such a link for hundreds of years. Common wisdom holds that if someone treats animals badly they are more likely to treat people badly (and presumably vice versa). Over the past decade there has been an increase in academic interest in the so-called 'Link' with many researchers finding support for a link between the treatment of (and attitude towards) animals (generally companion animals) and the risks for interpersonal violence (particularly domestic or family violence). In particular many studies have proposed a link between childhood cruelty towards animals, and aggressive and violent behaviour towards humans in adulthood (e.g., Ascione, 1992; 2001; Paul, 2000).

Companion animals play a large role in most people's lives (Taylor & Signal, 2005). They form part of the family dynamic and are often an important part of a child's life (perhaps especially if the family dynamic is a violent one). According to the Petcare Information and Advisory Service (2003), Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world with approximately 64% of households containing at least one companion animal (normally a cat or dog). However more recent research in Central Queensland suggests that the number of people who have at least one companion animal over their lifetime is much higher, closer to 90% (e.g., Signal & Taylor, 2006).

One of the main research areas addressing the 'Link' – and particularly the area that we do a lot of research in – is investigating the overlap between family violence or domestic violence; child abuse and the cruel treatment or deliberate harm of animals within that family as well (e.g., Adams, 1994; Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999, Taylor & Signal, 2004). Apart from being a target of violence per se, often animals are used as a coercive device, as a tool by the abuser, to keep the abused and the children in the situation quiet (e.g., Arluke, et al., 1999). We know from research, both in the United States and in Australia, that women and children are delaying leaving domestic violence situations because of the threats to their animals (e.g., Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997) and/or an inability to take the companion

animal with them if they leave. Unfortunately one of the things we know about domestic violence situations is that there is a tendency for the violence to escalate, i.e., the longer it goes on the more severe the violence tends to get.

In addition to this escalating risk of violence and harm, children within these families can sometimes go on to harm animals themselves. Overseas research is suggesting that we should take this (early) animal harm as a 'red flag'. That is, if a child is engaging in deliberate animal harm from an early age there's a high risk that they will continue on harming animals into adulthood, and that they may go on to harm humans. That's not to say that harming the humans is more important than harming the animals – far be it. But if we look at it as a red flag, as something that's a warning sign for future disruptive/harmful behaviour, we can use that as justification to get more money into research and into education programs to try and stop this cycle of violence.

However, one thing we have to be careful of here is popular notion of the 'Link'. If you look at the histories of 'serial killers' (that have been caught), there tends to be a history of animal abuse in their childhood (e.g., Arluke et al., 1999), often with the offender starting (or practising) on small animals before they moved on to harming humans. But the research evidence simply isn't there to be able to say, "If A, then B". So Timmy harming a kitten does not automatically mean Timmy will grow up to be a serial killer.

Our contention is that we should see children harming animals as very much a warning sign, and a time for us to get in there and intervene as quickly as we can. We believe that it is possible to change animal harm behaviours. I want to present some research that has occurred here in Queensland just over the last couple of years which seems to show that behavioural change is possible.

Firstly a quick encapsulation of the link. If you look at Figure 1 you can see the idea of three overlapping circles, Propensity for Aggression, Attitude to Animals and Attitudes to Humans.

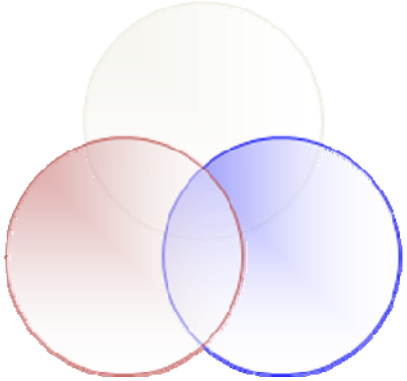

Figure 1. Blue= Attitude to Humans, Pink = Attitude to Animals, Grey = Propensity for Aggression

Our research is focused on the bit in the middle, where all three circles overlap. That is, there are people who have poor attitudes to animals (or a particular species) but don't take it any further. Similarly we have people who have got poor attitudes towards humans, but really like animals. We can also have people with a high propensity for violence, which doesn't necessarily mean they're going to harm animals or other people. But it's those that fall in the middle with an overlap of poor attitudes towards animals, poor attitudes towards humans and a propensity for violence that we need to look at and potentially target (for education campaigns etc).

While the theoretical 'Link' is interesting, is it real? As in, if we look at the average Australian community would we see this link? To help answer this question we ran a survey by approximately 600 people in the Central Queensland area, randomly selected to get as representative a sample as possible, with two measures: one which is an indicator of propensity for aggression towards people (Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire, Buss & Perry, 1992, where a higher score equates to higher propensity for aggression) and the other one was a measure of attitude towards the treatment of animals (Attitude to Animals Scale, AAS, Herzog, Betchart & Pittman, 1991). A higher score on the AAS indicates a better or more pro-animal welfare attitude.

Looking at Figure 2 (score on the aggression measure along the horizontal axis, score on the AAS on the vertical) you can see that we found the pattern we expected. That those with a low propensity for aggression tended to have a high level of pro-animal attitude; in contrast those with the highest Aggression scores tended to have lower than average attitudes towards animals.

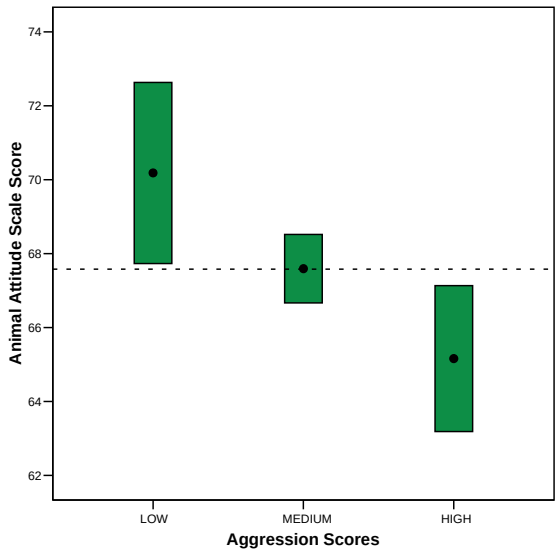

Figure 2. Average score (including 95% confidence interval) on the Animal Attitude Scale in relation to Aggression Score category

For more analysis and discussion of this project see Taylor & Signal (2004).

Given the 'Link', if we take as our premise, and our overall aim, reducing incidences of both human- and animal-directed violence, is there anything in the literature that suggests what can we do to try and reduce this?

Researchers have suggested that the propensity for aggression towards both animals and humans is linked to an impairment in empathy (e.g., Ascione, 1992; Jollife & Farrington, 2004; Lee & Prentice, 1988), where empathy is the ability to understand and (appropriately) emotionally respond to another's emotional state (Bryant, 1982; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Taylor & Signal, 2005). This lack of, or compromised, empathy could be due to abuse that an individual experiences as a child. It could be because the child does not have empathic behaviour modelled. As a behavioural psychologist I see empathy as a learned ability, it is something that you learn at a very young age from your parents/caregivers. Although very young children display empathy, (e.g., getting upset when another child is crying) how this ability develops will depend upon the surroundings. For example, if a child grows up in a situation where the family is in crisis, with domestic violence and aggression, there's a good chance that that child won't develop 'normal' empathy. Research shows that empathic responding is negatively related to aggression and antisocial, externalising behaviours (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988), therefore the development of normative empathy levels may be

an important factor in ensuring individuals do not develop the potential to engage in aggressive and antisocial behaviours (Taylor & Signal, 2005; Thompson & Gullone, 2003)

Given that empathy and aggression have been shown to be negatively related with high levels of empathy tending to equate to lower levels of aggression, can we intervene somehow and promote that empathy?

One research area addressing this and utilising the idea of the 'Link' is Humane Education (Animal-Assisted Therapy is another area but this is beyond the scope of this talk). What we are seeing in the literature is that most Humane Education Programs (HEP's) aim to increase children's understanding of animals and, at the same time, enhance animal welfare appropriate attitudes. Along the way, there is also a tendency to increase human-directed empathy as well. So, HEP's not only promote appropriate attitudes towards, and treatment of, animals, but they may also go some way to remedying empathy deficits that heighten the risk for future aggression and violence.

The emergence of formalised HEP's is fairly recent (e.g., Ascione, 1992) and as such there is limited empirical research available. In the past decade there has been a proliferation of HEP's across the world, however many of these have not been conducted in a methodologically rigorous manner and as such the data collected is not 'scientifically' robust. While there is little doubt that these programmes work, in order to obtain funding and wider acceptability for HEP's (e.g., so that they become part of the school curriculum) we need robust, methodologically sound results.

One of the other problems with the assessment of current HEP's is that most are very different from each other. That is, they may have specific goals (e.g., targeted toward promoting pro-animal behaviour toward a specific species), they may utilise different tools and/or different techniques. They can range from having a single presentation, with one person standing up in front of a class, through to bringing an animal into the classroom. This lack of standardisation is resulting in a lack of momentum in the literature.

The following piece of research was conducted by Rose Arbour (qualified teacher and a fourth year Psychology student, CQU) here in Brisbane. This project involved 37 grade four students from a mainstream State school, 23 boys and girls participated in the treatment group (which received the HEP). Fourteen took part in the control group (i.e., they did not receive the HEP). The average age across both groups was 9 years. This design is significant as one of the main problems in the literature around HEP is that there is not normally a control group (largely due to difficulties in recruitment I suspect), the inclusion of a

control group is essential to allow rigorous assessment of any changes caused by the intervention.

Both of the groups received pre- and post-testing. That is, before the HEP began, the children completed a questionnaire consisting (in part) of the Bryant Empathy Index (BIE) for Children (Bryant, 1982) which measured their current level of human-directed empathy and the Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire (Thompson & Gullone, 2003) which is a self-report measure of humane behaviour towards nonhuman animals.

Thanks must go to the members of the education team at RSPCA Qld, as without their help this project would not have been possible. Rose Arbour and an Education Officer developed the HEP lessons. The lessons were designed to deal with both issues of general animal husbandry and care (e.g., approaching dogs safely and nutritional needs) and animal cruelty issues specifically (e.g., Five Freedoms and definitions of animal cruelty). Participants were not made aware of the specific aims of the project, instead being told on a general level that the study would investigate attitudes to both animals and people in different situations.

The treatment group received two one-hour HEP lessons a week over four consecutive weeks, a relatively intensive HEP program. The control group continued with the normal school curriculum. Interestingly enough, the reason why there's such a disparity in numbers between the treatment and the control group is that it was very hard to get parents to agree to let their kids be in a control group; there was no such problem recruiting for the treatment group.

So what did we find? Presented in Figures 3 and 4 are the results from the CTAQ and BIE measures from the experimental group, there were no measurable changes across the pre- and post- testing interval for the control group. Overall there was a general increase in CTAQ (treatment of animals) scores but this increase did not reach statistical significance. This may well be what is known as a 'ceiling' effect as these kids already had, or at least expressed, fairly humane and appropriate treatment of animals. Interestingly however, we did find that there was more of a shift in boys' scores; that is the intervention had more of an effect for boys than it did for girls (see Figure 3). As an aside given that these are relatively small effects a larger sample would have helped give us a clearer picture.

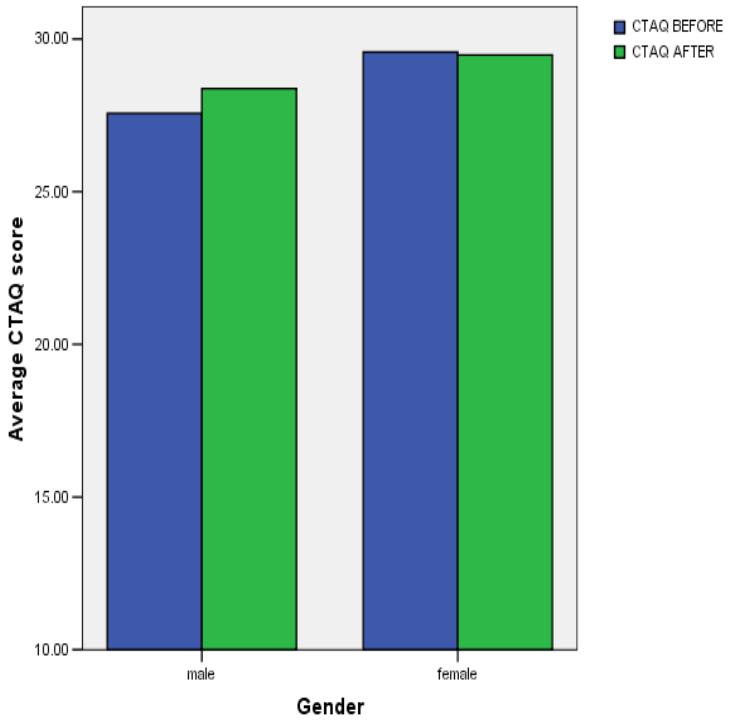

Figure 3. Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire score pre- and post- intervention

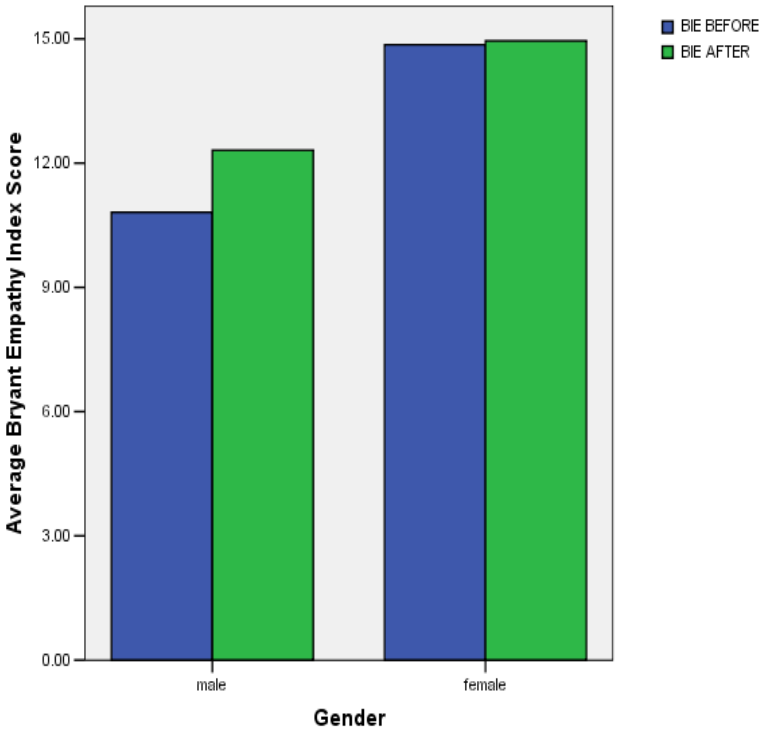

Figure 4. Bryant Empathy Index score pre- and post- intervention

The most interesting result was with the BIE (empathy measure). Again, what we found was a much bigger difference for boys than for girls (see Figure 4). The increase in human-directed empathy from pre- to post- test was significant for boys but not for girls (although there was still a slight increase).

So while the HEP intervention only improved attitudes towards animals slightly, it definitely improved human-directed empathy. Given the links between low empathy levels and the potential for aggression this is a pretty significant and important finding. However there are a few methodological issues which need to be highlighted here. Firstly a larger group would have been good, particularly within the control group, secondly the effect may be different within different age cohorts (e.g., as found by Ascione, 1992), and thirdly there may be differences in effectiveness dependent on the manner of presentation and the content of the HEP.

That is, the current HEP lessons were all literature based, as in there were no 'live' animals included in the presentation. The initial conceptualisation of this project included trained dogs (provided and supervised by the RSPCA Qld Education Officers), however we struck some hurdles when applying for ethical approval. This, combined with the strict guidelines the RSPCA have in place to protect the welfare of the dogs in this kind of therapy activity meant that including dogs within this HEP intervention simply wasn't possible (especially given the tight timeline of an honours thesis).

However this does mean that, those wanting to do larger-scale studies to investigate whether having an animal present increases the effects seen in the current study, need to be mindful of a few logistical and ethical issues that must be sorted before any such intervention can go ahead. Obviously it is very important to remember the effect that any such program has on the animals involved. The RSPCA (Qld) Education team very kindly donated their time to help this project however any larger project would need to take into account HR issues as well.

So, quickly, in conclusion, literature regarding the effectiveness of both humane education and animal-assisted therapy is very positive; there is a consensus that this type of approach works. However, it is dispersed across a huge array of disciplines. If we just look at the gathering here today, we can see the range of disciplines and backgrounds that we're all coming from, and the problem is that we're not getting a synergy and a momentum, if you like, in the literature.

I, being from a psychology background, find certain articles. My colleague from sociology finds completely different ones and often, they don't overlap. Beyond a few animal-based journals (e.g., **Society & Animals** and **Anthrozoos**) that publish multidisciplinary articles there is often resistance to publishing studies from different disciplines in mainstream academic journals. With the increasing interest in HEP across education, criminology, legal studies, etc., the evidence for the effectiveness of HEPs is getting fractured and dispersed.

We need standardisation. We need to have some standard measures. We need to have some, "Here's an accepted program. Here's how you measure it. Here's some outcome data."

And overall, I think, my take-home message is that HEP's have the potential to help current and future generations of children and animals avoid the cycle of violence. We can get in there and we can remedy some of those empathy deficits if we can actually deliberately teach, "No, you don't treat animals like this. This is the way you feel. This is the way they feel." Then we might be to make an impact on some of the horrific cases of animal abuse and interpersonal violence that we're seeing in Queensland and Australia more generally.

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Q – Delegate:

If I've got it right, direct experience of animals is clearly very much more effective than a simply literature-based thing in the classroom? I'm wondering about the intermediate stage which you could do, if you can't get the animals in, which is the use of video material. I'm particularly thinking, shall we say, at primary school level, and a resource such as 'Let's Ask the Animals', produced by the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (UK), of which we have some copies and could get to people. Material that gives kids some direct experience of animals at their most empathetic.

I suspect you're right. The literature's just not out there. There are so many of us working on humane education and sort of doing it within our own backyards, that it's not hitting the academic literature, if you like.

Now, that doesn't mean that the academic literature is the be-all and end-all and where we should all be aiming, but unfortunately, it's where the funding bodies look to decide who they give money to. So there's a project absolutely begging to be carried out as an investigation of efficacy of just a literature-based presentation versus an animal present versus a video-based. I simply don't know the answer. My suspicion is that you have literature based, video-based, animal present. But realistically, having the animal present is not going to be logistically or financially possible for most schools. So yes, I think that's definitely an area that needs looking into.

Q – Delegate:

Why do you think it is that young boys seem to have less empathy for animals? And as an educator, how would you recommend that we work on specifically increasing empathy for animals in young boys?

I suspect part of it's to do with the way we bring up boys, the way in which we sort of enculturalise them. Girls are brought up to be more empathic, to be more concerned and aware of other people and discuss and feel, if you know what I mean, and label their emotion. One of the big things that we've found within our AAT that's causing most difference in the boys is actually getting them to label their emotions and to talk about how they feel. And if you can't identify your own emotions, it's very hard to take that step to identify someone else's emotions.

We also have a tendency to allow boys to engage in more physical, rough play, both with other boys, but also with animals. So you'll see a boy running around with a dog and rough-and-tumbling with a dog, and there's nothing wrong with it, but you'll tend to see the girl sitting down, patting— And so, it's the way in which we're modelling behaviour as well, I suspect.

Q – Delegate:

I thought it was very interesting. I'm just wondering about the age which would be best to start doing this sort of program at, and whether or not it should be continued right through to sort of secondary school level. I've done this sort of thing, both AAT and humane education in NZ schools with animals. In primary school, it's been very effective, and I think it's a good thing to do. But I wonder if it needs to be continued on?

Yes, most of the literature suggests that the younger you get them, the better. Particularly if you're looking at remedying empathy deficit. So, pre-eight, if you can. I suspect, though, that the effects and the beneficial effects will keep on going. So I think that if we can have it in junior school, middle school and high school, that would be absolutely excellent, particularly to keep that message going, to keep reinforcing appropriate behaviours.

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