

This article was downloaded by: [Nathanson, Jane N.]

On: 15 October 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 915771747]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792303995>

### Animal Hoarding: Slipping Into the Darkness of Comorbid Animal and Self-Neglect

Jane N. Nathanson <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Private Practice, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 October 2009

**To cite this Article** Nathanson, Jane N. (2009) 'Animal Hoarding: Slipping Into the Darkness of Comorbid Animal and Self-Neglect', *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 21:4, 307 – 324

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/08946560903004839

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08946560903004839>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## **Animal Hoarding: Slipping Into the Darkness of Comorbid Animal and Self-Neglect**

JANE N. NATHANSON, LCSW, LRC, CRC  
*Private Practice, Boston, Massachusetts, USA*

*Substantial research and literature indicate how people and companion animals form relationships that are, for the most part, mutually beneficial. Yet there are highly dysfunctional human–animal relationships that do occur, meriting attention and remediation. One of the most perplexing and problematic human–animal relationships is encountered in cases of animal hoarding—a deviant behavior associated with extremely deleterious conditions of comorbid animal and self-neglect. Adult Protective Services workers often encounter theoretical and methodological dilemmas with these complex cases. To intervene most effectively, it becomes critical to elucidate some of the developmental factors of animal hoarding behavior and its correlation with self-neglecting behaviors in general. This article presents an in-depth diagnostic perspective as derived from the author’s research and clinical experience. An analysis of the complex dynamics of the relationship between animal hoarders and their pets is presented in conjunction with accepted theories of self-neglect. With enhanced knowledge and understanding of animal hoarding, human service professionals will be better prepared to respond to these clients, evoke greater rapport and cooperation, and engage in the interdisciplinary efforts that are essential for optimal resolution.*

**KEYWORDS** *animal hoarding, self-neglect, Adult Protective Services*

---

The author gratefully acknowledges the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium for their funding and collegial support, Dr. Gary J. Patronek for his advisory role in the writing of this manuscript, and Dr. Edward Messner (in memoriam) whose mentoring vitally influenced the development of this work.

Address correspondence to Jane N. Nathanson, 54 Ainsworth Street, Boston, MA 02131-1941, USA. E-mail: jnncnslt@aol.com

Within the last decade the phenomenon of animal hoarding has received increasing community awareness, intervention by local authorities, and media attention. Its distinct characteristics are defined by the following three operational features: (1) having more than the typical number of companion animals; (2) inability to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in starvation, illness, and death; and (3) denial of the inability to provide this minimum care and the impact of that failure on the animals, the household, and the human occupants of the dwelling (Patronek, 1999). The data derived from both the research and the casework devoted exclusively to animal hoarding has found that there are significant differences between the hoarding of animals and the hoarding of inanimate objects, especially with regard to its etiology, behavioral development, age of onset, and expressed motivation.

The primary source for demographic and other statistical information specifically pertaining to the hoarding of animals has been the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium. "The Hoarding of Animals: An Under-Recognized Public Health Problem in a Difficult-to-Study Population" (Patronek, 1999) is the seminal published work on this topic and contains findings on animal hoarding incidence (estimated at 700–2,000 cases per year), recidivism (100%), and age (46% being age 60 and older). Patronek's study was based on a sample of 54 case reports as provided by animal control, animal welfare, and protection organizations in the United States. With regard to incidence, Patronek has noted that, "the true prevalence of animal hoarding is undoubtedly much higher" (p. 87). This perspective relates to: (1) the social isolation and reclusive nature of many animal hoarders; (2) a dismissive response on the part of potential reporters (family, friends, neighbors, or others who encounter the premises); (3) the information provided by a reporter that may be insufficient to meet intake criteria required by specific agencies to proceed to intervene; and (4) the lack of an investigative authority within the hoarder's municipality.

The number of animals in each case can be astounding. In Patronek's study sample, the median was found to be 39; yet it was not uncommon that well over 100 animals were found in the hoarder's home. Characteristics of the living conditions of the animal hoarding cases in this study included: being heavily cluttered, unsafe, and unsanitary (77%); having accumulations of animal excrement in human living areas (69%); lacking a working bathroom (32%); and presence of animal carcasses in the home (59%). These cases also were characterized by the following limitations related to activities of daily living: use of toilet (53.8%), use of bath or shower (61.5%), use of kitchen sink (78.6%), maintenance of basic personal hygiene (74.2%), access to sanitary bed (56%), preparing food (86.7%), use of kitchen table (76%) or dining room table (89.5%), sitting in living room (61.3%), ability to find important objects (71.4%), and exiting home quickly in case of danger (61.3%).

Despite the extent of personal, home, and property deterioration, hoarders typically deny or minimize the problems and risks associated with poor sanitation, animal suffering and death, and their own substandard living conditions. To date, there has been negligible data available with regard to the percentage of animal hoarders' homes that have been condemned and the percentage of animal hoarders who have been deemed incompetent. The lack of this information is related to the fact that until recently, animal hoarding was considered to be an animal problem and not a human health problem for which public and mental health authorities would be involved. Furthermore, there continues to be inconsistent or non-existent interagency communication about these cases. In the majority of cases studied, there was "compelling evidence of self-neglect by the animal hoarder, and when dependent family members were present, neglect of them as well" (Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium [HARC], 2002, p. 129). Two additional published reports have described the experiences of Adult Protective Services (APS) workers with self-neglecting clients with pets. Boat and Knight (2000) highlighted the close connection between human and animal welfare. However, the focus of their study was on the self-neglect that results when clients, who may have only one or two animals, place a priority on fulfilling the animals' needs above their own. The magnitude of coexisting animal and self-neglect becomes overwhelmingly apparent in animal hoarding situations, given the broader scope, chronicity, and complexity of problems that occur with clients who have: (1) a number of animals in excess of their capacity and/or willingness to consistently provide satisfactory caregiving; (2) a number of animals that exceeds their spatial requirements and interferes with the person's safe mobility; and/or (3) enough poorly cared for animals such that the living environment is toxic (i.e., as may be related to bacterial disease, respiratory illness, zoonotic disease, and insect and vermin infestation).

In 2001 the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the National Center of Elder Abuse (NCEA) conducted a survey of APS supervisors and caseworkers. Their findings indicated that "more than 92% said that APS workers encountered animal neglect coexisting with a client's inability to care for him/herself. This indicates that reports of animal neglect may be an important warning sign for the presence of self-neglect by vulnerable adults" (Humane Society of the United States & the National Center of Elder Abuse, 2001).

Consequently, conditions of comorbid animal and self-neglect are prevalent when animal hoarders share the same squalid living conditions as their animals and demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to attend to such mutual basic needs as safety, sanitation, nutrition, and hygiene. As noted previously, unfortunately most animal hoarding cases have historically been reported and attended to by animal protection authorities without the collaborative involvement of other authorities and agencies related

to human health and welfare. Berry, Patronek, and Lockwood (2005), and Patronek, Loar, and Nathanson (2006) stress the limitations of this approach, which assumes that animal hoarding is strictly a matter for animal welfare and humane law enforcement to resolve. They further point out that simply punitive responses alone have failed to lessen the high rate of recidivism that has occurred. Effective intervention is now recognized as being dependent on the development of task forces at the local level to plan an interdisciplinary course of action to address and resolve the multiplicity of problematic conditions, including the animal hoarder's unmet physical and mental health care needs; the condemnation of his or her home; and the myriad of related housing, legal, and financial consequences of these cases (Patronek et al., 2006).

### BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT OF APS AGENCIES

A wide range of institutional and procedural factors have limited a customary involvement of APS workers in animal hoarding cases. However, there are four core issues meriting particular attention and clarification because they reflect lack of knowledge, erroneous beliefs, or perceived conflicts to the mission of APS.

1. A prevailing assumption that because of the disposition of these cases, humane law enforcement will resolve the problem.

Following the removal of the animals and the sanctions imposed, human service agencies and public health authorities may presume that there is no further need to intervene, or, in other words, "no animals, no problems." However, not only does the property itself remain unsafe and unsanitary for human habitation, but the behavior of the animal hoarder essentially remains unchanged, despite whatever punitive actions took place, because the research has documented that the recidivism rate is close to 100% (Patronek, 1999; Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium, 2002; Patronek et al., 2006).

2. The fundamental belief that a competent person has the right to live as he or she desires within his or her own home.

Caseworkers may feel a profound sense of conflict between honoring clients' rights to self-determination and striving to reduce or eliminate the high risk and related consequences if proactive protectionism is not pursued. Many individuals and agencies alike have long considered animal hoarding (in the past more benignly termed "collecting") to be a lifestyle choice, the perspective being that a competent person has the right to live with accumulated excrement, filth, nonfunctioning appliances, general

disarray, and so on, if the individual chooses to do so. Yet, this principle of self-determination may come into conflict with community or state codes and regulations that insure that human and animal dependents in the home are not being abused and neglected, or are not living in unsafe or unsanitary conditions.

3. Lack of understanding about the nature of functional versus dysfunctional relationships with companion animals.

A likely barrier to APS engagement, and certainly a major barrier to effective intervention, is the widespread misunderstanding about the root contributing factors to these cases. As described in point 1, the problem (too many pets) is confused with the solution (get rid of the pets). Unfortunately, removal of the animals ignores the underlying motivations that caused the person to accumulate the animals in the first place. Although the contributing pathological factors of animal hoarding have yet to be confirmed, Patronek's (1999) research and the author's casework to date have found that animal hoarding behavior has generally emerged later in life, following what had been a natural and normal affinity that the individual has had for pets in his or her childhood or young adult history. Therefore, to gain insight into animal hoarders' motivations and the development of their behaviors, it becomes essential to first examine the role and significance of companion animals in the context of normal human-animal relationships and then proceed to examine how it can become dysfunctional and warped in animal hoarding with its severe state of both animal and self-neglect.

4. Conflicting objectives on the part of APS and animal protection authorities.

Because animal protection workers strive to protect the animals, APS and other human service agencies may become fearful that collaborative efforts with animal protection and public health authorities may result in the clients' losing the animals on whom they have become extremely emotionally dependent. Some animal hoarders may threaten suicide or homicide if forced to relinquish any of their animals. Workers may fear that by reporting unsafe and unsanitary conditions as related to animal protection or public health, or by establishing a working relationship with these authorities, they will sacrifice the trust and rapport that they have struggled to achieve with their clients. Consequently, faced with these ethical dilemmas and without knowing if and how to proceed in these complex cases, workers may not engage in collaborative efforts with animal welfare and public health authorities. Therefore, it becomes necessary to clarify how the hoarding of animals, in contrast to the hoarding of inanimate objects, entails the involvement of additional and

strong statutory authorities that impose potentially greater sanctions as related to the violation of animal cruelty laws. In addition to the substantial health risks associated with squalid living conditions in general, the hoarder may not only temporarily or permanently lose his or her home as the result of condemnation, but also be at risk for the forcible removal or surrender of his or her animals, whom have become most critical to the hoarder's sense of identity, self-esteem, control, and even his or her expressed purpose for living. Thus, it becomes crucial for the APS caseworker to employ substantial efforts to intervene in a manner by which the potential losses may be mitigated and/or the individual receive supportive counseling.

Because the goal of APS is to keep the individual's interest at heart, caseworkers who become involved in an animal hoarding case prior to the intervention of the authorities are in a position to serve a vital role of imparting essential information so that the hoarder is apprised of the municipal regulations, state laws, and sanctions that he or she risks. It is likely that the animal hoarder will be unaware of relevant laws; deny that he or she is in violation of the laws; or dismiss the potential that he or she might be charged with sentences ranging from loss of animals to denial of the right to have animals in the future to fines to imprisonment. The hoarder may be unaware of the risk of both homelessness due to the public health department's condemnation of the property and losing custody of human dependents in the home. If the animal hoarder is receptive and responsive to the information and guidance provided by the APS caseworker, then further steps can be taken as the caseworker develops collaborative relationships with the community resources that are able to remediate the conditions in a manner that is potentially more cooperative than coercive.

Adult Protective Service caseworkers who become involved after animal welfare and protection authorities can provide an essential and supportive role of crisis intervention and care management. Their role can significantly facilitate the fulfillment of the hoarder's needs for medical and/or psychiatric care, home restoration, temporary or permanent relocation, and legal and/or financial assistance.

By effectively communicating, developing rapport, and engaging in a trusted relationship with the animal hoarder in this regard, the APS caseworker strives to protect the interests of the individual by way of apprising them of the imminent risks and consequences of these conditions. The caseworker further protects the interests of the client by facilitating the remediation of the conditions via identification of and coordination with community resources for temporary or permanent relocation, personal and homecare services, and/or funding for housing rehabilitation. Furthermore, given the specialized skills of the APS caseworker to work collaboratively with community resources and to communicate most effectively with resistant or

challenging behaviors, the caseworker may have the strongest potential of all involved to evoke client cooperation and to facilitate an interdisciplinary team approach with the authorities and others who can be enlisted to provide assistance in ways that might be needed and welcomed by the hoarder.

### THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF THE HUMAN–ANIMAL BOND IN FUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

For thousands of years the emotional bonds that people form with animals have been depicted in art, archeology, and literature (Serpell, 1986). However, it was not until 1981 that the Delta Society was established as an organization to promote interdisciplinary research, education, and services related to the understanding of the human–animal bond and its cultural and societal impact. In this regard, centers to study the human–animal bond have been established at major universities, and a large body of work documenting the positive effect that companion animals have on human health and well-being has subsequently been published (Fine, 2000).

Most pet owners are strongly devoted to their animals. The American Animal Hospital Association's 2004 survey of pet owners found that: 77% consider the pet to be a full-fledged member of the family; 55% consider themselves to be the "mom" or "dad" of their pets, referring to the pet as "a child of mine"; 54% feel an emotional dependency on the pet; 50% would choose the pet rather than a human as a companion if on a deserted island; 45% believe that their pets listen to them best (over a spouse, friend, or family member); 56% would risk their own lives for a pet; and 73% would go into debt to provide for a pet's well-being (American Animal Hospital Association, 2004).

What are the specific significant characteristics of domesticated animals that may be the basis on which humans develop an affinity for animals in general, and specifically, what motivates individuals to form intense relationships with their pets? Pet owners often cite that their pets:

- Provide unconditional love by virtue of the pet's nonjudgmental nature
- Afford a sense of stability and predictability; an element of constancy throughout all personal and family changes
- Enable the person to feel a sense of trust and security
- Contribute to the person's sense of physical and mental well-being
- Are aesthetically pleasing (the person may appreciate the pet's form, movement, and tactile characteristics)
- Communicate simply in a manner whereby people feel there is mutual understanding
- Engage the person in forms of noncompetitive (stress-free) and enjoyable play and recreation



Promote self-esteem by virtue of the pet's dependence on the person's caregiving (thereby the person feels valued as a caregiver, rescuer, or savior of a life that might otherwise be unwanted or homeless)  
Enable the person to have a sense of control in the relationship

From a psychological perspective, Beck and Katcher (1983) have provided some of the earliest analyses of the person–pet relationship.

The truth is that with our pets we are both mother and child, simultaneously or alternately, with the pet playing the opposite part. When we greet our pets in the morning or on returning home in the evening, they are transitional objects, permitting us to enter new territory or a new day or to safely return from foreign territory. . . . Because we alternate the roles of child and parent with our pets, the feeling of mutual love and devotion is understandable, not only because the pet carries some of the idealized attributes of the mother, but because the pet is also the self. In mothering the pet we are mothering ourselves. In being mothered by our pets we are recreating the faith of the infant in superabundant love. (pp. 86, 88)

Rynearson (1978) explained how the child in a dysfunctional family may seek refuge with the pet from whom consistent trusted nurturance is derived. According to Brown and Katcher (2001), children who have been victims of abuse, neglect, or trauma may experience an exclusively safe environment in the company of animals with whom close attachments readily develop. In essence, then, we might perceive the person–pet relationship as an extraordinary opportunity to “rewrite the script” in terms of what one has wanted but failed to receive in an earlier period of one’s life. For the most part, the pet can become a constantly accessible resource that affords comfort and pleasure on demand to ease one’s wounds and fears be they past or present. Such immediate gratification is unparalleled in human relationships whether in infancy, early childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. For many, the relationship with the pet may appear to be a panacea smoothing over the rough edges of one’s family, home, social, and work life. According to Belk (1996) “we may now keep pets to remind ourselves of our own animality and to stave off the boredom of an overly rational, sanitized, and orderly society.” Belk concludes that “if pets act as part of our extended self, they represent a divided self that is both civilized and tame, well-behaved and animalistic, controlled and chaotic. If this is a mixed metaphor, it reflects the way we view ourselves in the contemporary world” (p. 142).

Comparing the social support that one may derive from humans versus the companionship of animals, it has been suggested that “aspects of perceived support from a pet may have greater stability than similar elements of support from a human relationship . . . that pets are not human may be advantageous because there’s no fear that the relationship will be damaged by

displays of weakness, emotion, or by excessive demands” (Collis & McNicholas, 1998, p. 116).

Given these functional dynamics of the human–animal relationship, it is no wonder that a large segment of our population has experienced at some point, as a child or adult, a profoundly beneficial relationship with a pet and consequently has continued to value, want, and need the formation of these bonds during their lifetime. The acquisition of the animal companion(s) and the development of strong, highly bonded relationships may or may not be continuous throughout one’s adulthood and may be potentially prompted at any point, given particular life events or conditions.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL HUMAN–ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

Until recently, most of what was written or discussed about the adverse human behaviors related to the keeping of pets (what might be termed the “dark side” of human–animal relationships) pertained to deliberate cruelty to animals where the perpetrator derives some form of pleasure from the neglect or abuse of an animal (Lockwood & Ascione, 1998). Animal hoarding represents a distinctive form of cruelty in which there is no intent to cause harm, but the animals nevertheless endure great suffering.

For reasons that are not yet fully understood, individuals may become unstable with regard to their need to acquire animals. Consequently, they reach a point when the number of animals exceeds their capacity or potential to properly maintain the animals’ health and well-being. Despite animal hoarders’ apparent lack of consistent attentiveness, knowledge base, self-discipline, or general behavioral pattern to fulfill the animals’ routine care requirements, they often express a sense of mission to rescue and give love to homeless and unwanted animals. Although maintaining caregiving practices for the excessive number of animals would most likely be an unrealistic objective to begin with, caregiving deficiencies also may be caused or exacerbated by the animal hoarder’s having untreated physical and/or mental impairments. Financial limitations may further compound the individual’s incapacity to care for a large number of pets. Regardless of the factors contributing to the deplorable conditions, animal hoarders often persist in their assertion that if they did not possess the animals, the animals would be homeless or die. However, given the severe neglect of their essential needs, animals in hoarding conditions are deprived of an environment that is in keeping with their species, and consequently they exist in prolonged states of deprivation, disease, pain, and/or suffering. Despite animal hoarders’ expressed motivations to save the animals’ lives, we may well ask: Is any life better than no life? While the animal hoarder’s expressed rationale for his or her persistent acquisition of pets will often be “they need me,” the animal

hoarder's own self-serving needs for these animals must be addressed. Commenting on the potential for people to become overly emotionally dependent on their animals, Milani (2003) has written: ". . . sometimes my need to feel loved is more important to me than my need to relate to and love the animals in my life in a way that makes sense to them."

Patronek and colleagues' (2006) *Animal Hoarding* presents a typology of animal hoarders whose expressed or unconscious motivations for acquiring animals are varied, ranging from the "overwhelmed caregiver" to the "rescuer/savior" to the "breeder-hoarder" to the "exploiter hoarder." It is the authors' speculation that in all of these categories there are three common characteristic benefits that the animal hoarder is deriving from the behavior: identity, self-esteem, and control. For animal hoarders in general, these three dimensions of essential life forces are continuously heightened and reinforced by virtue of the domain that has been created by way of their perceived positive interactions with these sentient animals who have become exclusively dependent on the individual. Yet, as previously noted, we might ask: Isn't the animal hoarder just as exclusively dependent on the animals as a superabundant resource from which to derive attention, affection, and responsiveness? When customary social contexts have failed to fulfill these developmental needs, the animal hoarder is able to reside within a domain where positive identity, self-esteem, and control can be cultivated.

## NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES RELATED TO ANIMAL HOARDING BEHAVIOR

To date, a number of psychological models have been speculated as being related to animal hoarding behavior. The theories include a delusional model (belief system being out of touch with reality); a dementia model (lack of insight into the situation; does not recognize what is happening to the animals and oneself); an addictions model (lack of impulse control; the person can only focus on the object of desire); an attachment model (early deprivation of parental love and stability); and an obsessive-compulsive disorder model (Lockwood, 1994, pp. 19–20). Frost and Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (2000) have further hypothesized that there may be "a developmental and gender-role link that may also have to do with feelings of vulnerability" (p. 26). It is additionally noted that the interviewees for the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium study "were relatively isolated and socially anxious, perhaps causing interactions with animals to be more comfortable than interactions with people" (Frost & Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium, 2000, p. 26).

Given the widely held assumption that the hoarding of animals appears to be parallel with the hoarding of inanimate objects, the obsessive compulsive model (OCD) became the theory that was most frequently utilized in attempts to explain or understand animal hoarding. Consequently, media

reports of these cases have perpetuated this application by their repeated references to OCD. Although there may be aspects of animal hoarding that share some superficial similarities with OCD, the distinction must be emphasized between the hoarding of sentient beings with whom one has a dynamic relationship (often entailing a moralistically oriented “rescue mission”) and the hoarding of material objects. Throughout the past 9 years of casework with animal hoarders, the author’s observations have found that the majority of animal hoarding cases are not similarly motivated (i.e., “I might have a use or need for this some day”), are not ritualistic and/or repetitive (checking) behavior, and are not responsive to the treatments most frequently applied to OCD (i.e., medication; reality testing combined with categorization for each object along a continuum of value, utility, or need). Although there are animal hoarders whose diagnostic profile may include OCD, it has not been the strongest characteristic that the author has observed. Her clinical experience has found that animal hoarding is likely related to a complex, multifaceted spectrum of underlying psychological disorders, the most relevant taking into account the interactive relationship between the human and the animals, along with the driving force of excessive caregiving, which has been associated with attachment disorder. In conjunction with this finding, the author’s casework has encountered a prevalence of complicated or traumatic grief, dissociative disorder, addiction, and anxiety related to a state of heightened vulnerability outside of the secure domain that has been created with one’s hoard of animals.

As may be related to complicated or traumatic grief, the author has observed that despite animal hoarders’ having developed bonds with each animal as a beloved, distinctive family member, when pets have died an overt demonstration of intense or prolonged grief was often lacking. However, Patronek’s research (1999), Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (2002), and the author’s casework cite many cases in which the animal corpses were kept “in place” or permanently stored in the home. This particular behavior, which has been frequently noted in the literature and media accounts, may be reflective of the denial, delusion, or dissociation that has been associated with complicated grief.

The author speculates that animal hoarders who are insatiably buying, adopting, or otherwise acquiring unwanted or homeless animals may be finding the animals to be numbing agents, or a “fix” in response to having been traumatically affected by unresolved major losses of loved ones and/or having been deprived of favorable developmental conditions during childhood or adolescence. When these core emotional conditions remain untreated, the animal hoarder’s behavior may be perceived as similar to a continual striving to quench one’s thirst by filling up with food. Within their construct of a world that provides apparent safety, security, and reciprocal nurturance, animal hoarders may very well experience some semblance of healing. Yet, it is illusive and ultimately unsustainable as the conditions of

human and animal neglect become a slippery slope of potentially devastating losses of one's health, animals, and home.

With regard to cognitive functioning, the author's casework found that although a high percentage of these hoarders appeared to be competent by a customary standard (i.e., Mini-Mental Status Examination or other methods of demonstrating orientation to person, place, and time), the majority conveyed negligible awareness or erroneous information related to human-animal safety and health and/or the state and local codes that apply to the protection of humans, animals, and property in their communities. Even if or when this information was known to the animal hoarder, the author noted that within her first 15 cases of animal hoarders, at least 67% demonstrated poor information processing and cognitive or executive functioning skills (planning, organizing, and implementing tasks). These limitations were evidently undermining trouble-shooting and problem-solving skills as related to the implementation of human and animal health, safety, and sanitation measures. Therefore, even if or when animal hoarders express the intentions to remediate their personal and property conditions, they may not have the cognitive capacities to act accordingly. Without conducting further comprehensive neuropsychological evaluations, it will not be known whether cognitive limitations are related to dementia, the effects of medication, untreated medical or psychological conditions, or the neurological effects of the toxic environment of the animal hoarders' homes.

## THEORIES OF SELF-NEGLECT AS RELATED TO ANIMAL HOARDING

When cases of animal hoarding are discovered—whether by family, friends, neighbors, or humane law enforcement—the customary question is: How can anyone choose to live like this? The literature on self-neglect includes a number of different theories that have strong relevance to the animal hoarder in general.

For centuries, there have been individuals who neglect basic human needs such as hygiene, grooming, nutrition, and/or medical care. Some of the historical perspectives on self-neglect—as discussed by Bozinovski (2000); Duke (1991); Fabian and Rathbone-McCuan (1992); Jackson (1997); and O'Brien, Thibault, Turner, and Laird-Fick (1999)—convey that self-neglecting individuals often were considered outcasts, recluses, or hermits; at times they may even have been treated like witches who were possessed by the devil. Presenting themselves in unclean, heavily soiled, tattered clothing and living with filthy possessions and in excessively cluttered or littered property, self-neglecters may have been loosely or incorrectly labeled as being senile, crazy, or incompetent. They may have incurred further criticism for their lack of apparent shame or embarrassment about their grossly neglected personal or property conditions. Even if these individuals were offered help to improve themselves or their surroundings, they likely

would refuse or at least be highly resistant to making any changes. Consequently, persons who were severely self-neglecting often encountered antagonism, disgust, discomfort, and/or fear (Fabian & Rathbone-McCuan, 1992; Jackson, 1997; O'Brien et al., 1999).

As society became what might be considered more sociologically or psychologically sophisticated in its views, a number of theories started to emerge about self-neglect. In their review of the terminology associated with self-neglect, O'Brien et al. (1999, p. 3) and Fabian and Rathbone-McCuan (1992, p. 5) write that in the 1960s, the term "social breakdown syndrome" emerged from the work of MacMillan and Shaw (1966) as a concept to explain the behavior of the self-neglector. Subsequently, Clark, Mankikar, and Gray (1975) referred to this condition as Diogenes Syndrome, named after a fourth-century Greek philosopher known for his lack of shame, outspokenness, rejection of common standards, and contempt of social organizations.

Although conditions of self-neglect may be the result of mental or physical illness, there are theories related to identity, ageism, and control that appear to be especially relevant to the compelling need that one may have for acquiring animals, despite incapacities to maintain both them and oneself properly. A disconcerting speculation is that self-neglect may actually be a process of normal aging, in other words, self-neglecting behaviors may be associated with the effects of cumulative losses. Citing Kuyper and Bengtson (1973), Rathbone-McCuan (1996) explains how "losses that accompany aging—children moving away and deaths of spouses and friends, unclear ideas about what to expect as people age, disappearance of a reference group, and a dramatic drop in public status—all provide strong negative reinforcement to feelings of uselessness and obsolescence in old age" (p. 46). Especially in a culture with negative attitudes or ageism adversely affecting elders and undermining their self-esteem, the neglect of personal and property conditions may be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless of the contributing factors or potential physical, mental, and theoretical issues associated with self-neglect, Woolf (1998) emphasizes the need for interventions that are tailored to the individual, given an assessment of his or her history, specific situation, and conditions. Without treatment, it can be expected that the deteriorating effects of physical and mental illness, malnutrition, lack of safe and sanitary conditions, as well as chronic stress and unresolved grief will exacerbate the state of self-neglect. With regard to the affects of poor or nonexistent social support, Woolf has found that there is a decline in overall life satisfaction that correlates with higher degrees of self-neglect. The isolation factor contributes to diminished "reality testing," such that self-neglecting individuals have decreased awareness of the risks involved in their behavior. Consequently, it is not unusual to encounter self-neglecters who are uninformed or misinformed with regard to safety and sanitation codes and the related risk of losing their home if the conditions are squalid, vermin invested, or deemed to be environmentally toxic.

In seeking to understand self-neglect, and in particular its application to an elder's animal hoarding behavior, there are two additional theories that merit consideration as salient contributing factors. Bozinovski (2000) presents the theory of continuity of self and control with regard to the concept of the last vestige of control, which relates to one's bodily functions—how self-neglect may reflect an assertion of choice to either maintain or ignore personal care, such as hygiene, grooming, and dress. Bozinovski further provides a number of characteristics of self-neglecters that have been documented in the research and casework with animal hoarders. She cites the “three main aspects of interpersonal problems” (viewed as “a source of threat to self”) as being related to: “distrust of other persons . . . past major life events . . . and the inability to take the perspective of others (inaccurate role-taking)” (p. 44). Bozinovski further explains how “taken together, they represent significant threats to identity and to the sense of customary control. Self-neglect clients face a formidable challenge in maintaining a valued sense of self and customary personal control during their later years given the accumulation of identity and control threats over a lifetime” (p. 44).

Bozinovski notes that “the majority of self-neglecters reported minimal attachments to other persons. Support networks were either non-existent or were limited to one or two persons . . . For older persons, distrust stemmed from repeated and life-long experiences in which other persons betrayed confidences, abandoned them during times of need, and covertly and overtly deceived them. There is a clear relationship between life-long experiences with negative social interactions and alienation in later life” (pp. 44–45). Bozinovski notes the prevalence of “abandonment, betrayals, and relationships with parents” that have affected chronic fears of loss of control and “fear of encroachment by others” (pp. 46–47).

Additionally relevant to animal hoarders is Bozinovski's explanation of the difficulty that self-neglecters demonstrate once confronted by the critical or challenging perspectives of others. Although “stepping outside one's own perspective” may be related to mental capacity, she has found that in “some cases, clients perhaps chose to appear as though they could not understand others' perspectives as a self-protection tactic.” This behavior may then relate to one's resistance to being confronted by those who convey that the self-neglecter's living conditions are problematic. “They [self-neglecters] are most concerned with curtailing or preventing interactions with persons who offer discrepant definitions of the situation. This is particularly the case when the discrepancies are perceived as discrediting to self or as diminishing personal control” (Bozinovski, 2000, p. 50).

As previously discussed, these research findings and theories on self-neglect are highly applicable to the research and clinical work that has found animal hoarders to be adversely affected by social isolation, unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, and highly problematic personal, medical/psychiatric, or property conditions that only worsen in light of the hoarder's

state of denial and resistance to rehabilitative intervention (Beck & Katcher, 1983; HARC, 2002; Lockwood, 1994; Patronek, 1999).

### TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE APS INTERVENTION WITH ANIMAL HOARDERS

When APS case workers are called on to intervene in cases of animal hoarding, the policies and practices associated with self-neglect cases in general are fundamentally applicable. However, animal hoarding does specifically involve behaviors and laws that may not have been encountered through the course of training and/or experience. Therefore, it is recommended that the agency develop existing training programs that will address the following needs.

Learn the criteria that define animal hoarding and identify the specific resources that provide animal welfare and protection services as needed for a coordination of efforts.

Understand the human–animal relationship (both functional and dysfunctional) in order to facilitate rapport and related communication with the animal hoarder.

Learn the state’s animal anticruelty laws and the local animal control regulations as well as the sanctions that are imposed for violations; become familiarized with related reference materials and have them available (in lay language) to review with the hoarder, as may be needed.

Identify specific individuals within community resources and agencies in order to develop collaborative relationships as needed to create a multidisciplinary team approach for crisis intervention and case management (e.g., animal welfare and protection, public health, social and mental health, neighborhood code enforcement, police, fire).

Identifying stakeholder agencies and learning who can provide what type of help is an essential first step to a comprehensive and lasting solution. . . . Knowing which agency does what is not enough; understanding how to navigate within each agency is equally important. . . . Therefore, understanding agency structure and culture contributes to an integrated, comprehensive, and lasting solution to animal hoarding cases. (Patronek et al., 2006, p. 3)

### SUMMARY

Comorbid animal and self-neglect are prominent features of animal hoarding. As is common with self-neglecters in general, animal hoarders are adversely



affected by their social isolation and diminished resources of support, cumulative major losses, and fear of confronting further loss. In particular, there is significant decompensation in response to one's diminished sense of identity, self-esteem, and control.

For animal hoarders who, at some earlier point in their lives, may have discovered a sense of safety, security, and mutual nurturance in the company of animals, the functional nature of their human–animal relationships have become dysfunctional given the animal hoarders' exclusive reliance on the domain that has been created with their animals. With deteriorating conditions compromising the health and well-being of all involved, animal hoarders become entrenched in a behavior that is extremely resistant to change. Denying any actual or potential risks, they ferociously defend this turf while being unaware or dismissive of the violations of animal protection laws and public health regulations.

The literature that provides the theories, fundamental principles, intervention, and case management guidelines on self-neglecters in general is highly applicable to the self-neglecting animal hoarder. However, cases of animal hoarding require an additional specialized base of knowledge with regard to: (1) the dynamics of the individual's unique relationship and interaction with his or her animals, as this insight will impact heavily on the manner by which caseworkers develop the essential rapport, trust, and communication that lay the groundwork for evoking a cooperative response to service planning and case management; and (2) the applicable local and state standards for human and animal habitation. With this enhanced informational background, APS workers can better apprise and advise the animal hoarder with regard to his or her rights and obligations under the law to protect both humans and animals. With an emphasis on cultivating a relationship based on an understanding of the hoarder's values, wants, and needs, the worker can facilitate the building of an alliance to provide the guidance and support that is necessary to promote and implement measures for the safety, health, and well-being of the hoarder, human and animal dependents, property, and community.

## REFERENCES

- American Animal Hospital Association. (2004). *National survey of people and pet relationships*. Lakewood, CO: Author.
- Beck, A., & Katcher, A. (1983). *Between pets & people: The importance of animal companionship*. New York: Putnam Publishing Co.
- Belk, R. W. (1996). Metaphoric relationships with pets. *Society & Animals, Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, 4(2), 121–145.
- Berry, C., Patronek, G. P., & Lockwood, R. (2005). Long term outcomes in animal hoarding cases. *Animal Law*, 11, 167–193.

- Boat, B. W., & Knight, J. C. (2000). Experiences and needs of adult protective services case managers when assisting clients who have companion animals. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, *12*(3/4), 145–155.
- Bozinovski, S. D. (2000). Older self-neglecters: Interpersonal problems and the maintenance of self-continuity. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, *12*(1), 37–56.
- Brown, S., & Katcher, A. (2001). Pet attachment and dissociation. *Society and Animals, Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, *9*(1), 25–41.
- Clark, A., Mankikar, G., & Gray, I. (1975). Diogenes syndrome: A clinical study of gross self-neglect in old age. *Lancet*, *1*(7903), 366–368.
- Collis, G. M., & McNicholas, J. (1998). A theoretical basis for health benefits of pet ownership: Attachment versus psychological support. In C. C. Wilson & D. C. Turner (Eds.), *Companion animals in human health*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duke, J. (1991). A national study of self-neglecting adult protective services clients. In T. Tataru & M. Rittman (Eds.), *Findings of five elder abuse studies* (pp. 23–53). Washington, DC: National Aging Resource Center on Elder Abuse.
- Fabian, D. R., & Rathbone-McCuan, E. (1992). Elder self-neglect: A blurred concept. In E. Rathbone-McCuan & D. R. Fabian (Eds.), *Self-neglecting elders: A clinical dilemma* (pp. 3–12). New York: Auburn House.
- Fine, A. H. (2000). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Frost, R., & Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium. (2000). People who hoard animals. *Psychiatric Times*, *17*(4), 25–29.
- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC). (2002). Health implications of animal hoarding. *Health & Social Work*, *27*(2), 126–136.
- Humane Society of the United States & the National Center of Elder Abuse. (2001). Survey of Professionals in Adult Protective Services. Retrieved March 1, 2007 from [www.hsus.org/hsus\\_field/first\\_strike\\_the\\_connection\\_between\\_animalcruelty\\_and\\_human\\_violence/elder\\_abuse\\_and\\_animal\\_cruelty/survey\\_of\\_professionals\\_in\\_adult\\_protective\\_services.html](http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/first_strike_the_connection_between_animalcruelty_and_human_violence/elder_abuse_and_animal_cruelty/survey_of_professionals_in_adult_protective_services.html)
- Jackson, G. (1997). Diogenes Syndrome—How should we manage it? *Journal of Mental Health*, *6*(2), 113–116.
- Kuyper, J. A., & Bengtson, V. L. (1973). Social breakdown and competence: A model of normal aging. *Human Development*, *16*(3), 182–201.
- Lockwood, R. (1994). The psychology of animal collectors. *Trends Magazine*, *9*(6), 18–21.
- Lockwood, R., & Ascione, F. (Eds.). (1998). *Cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence: Readings in research and application*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- MacMillan, D., & Shaw, P. (1966). Senile breakdown in standards of personal and environmental cleanliness. *British Medical Journal*, *2*, 227–229.
- Milani, M. (2003). The human-animal bond and addiction. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from [www.mmilani.com/commentary-200306.html](http://www.mmilani.com/commentary-200306.html)
- O'Brien, J. G., Thibault, J., Turner, L., & Laird-Fick, H. S. (1999). Self-neglect: An overview. In J. O'Brien (Ed.), *Self-neglect: Challenges for helping professional* (pp. 1–19). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Patronek, G., Loar, L., & Nathanson, J. N. (Eds.). (2006). *Animal boarding: Structuring interdisciplinary responses to help people, animals and communities at risk*. The

- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium. Retrieved January 18, 2006 from [www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/)
- Patronek, G. J. (1999). Hoarding of animals: An under-recognized public health problem in a difficult to study population. *Public Health Reports*, *114*(1), 81–87.
- Rathbone-McCuan, E. (1996). Self-neglect in the elderly: Knowing when and how to intervene. *Aging Magazine*, *36*(7), 44–49.
- Rynearson, E. K. (1978). Humans and pets and attachment. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *133*, 550–555.
- Serpell, J. A. (1986). *In the company of animals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Wolf, L. M. (1998). Elder abuse and neglect. Retrieved April 7, 2007 from [www.webster.edu/~woolfm/abuse.html](http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/abuse.html)