

Introduction

Just a Dog

The judge summarily dismissed the egregious case of animal cruelty against Willa, despite strong evidence that the dog was hideously beaten with baseball bats. People standing near the bench heard the judge glibly mumbling, "It's just a dog . . ." as he moved on to a "more important case," a liquor store "B & E." The humane law enforcement agents who prosecuted Willa's case felt a surge of anger and frustration, seeing their effort go nowhere. The abusers disappeared quickly from the courtroom, still puzzled about why such a "big stink" was made over a dog. At the local humane society, the staff soon got the disappointing news that Willa's abusers walked away scot-free but found much to celebrate that made them feel good about their work—the dog's abusers at least had their day in court, a dedicated and highly skilled veterinary staff saved Willa from death, and an employee adopted her.

—Author's field notes, June 1996

I OBSERVED THE ANIMAL CRUELTY case against Willa in court and overheard disappointed humane agents, who had hoped for a different result, retell the events days later. Two youths brutally beat the dog after accepting the owner's offer of a few dollars to kill her because she urinated in his house. As the beating went on, an off-duty police officer drove by and intervened. Although it seemed as strong as any such case could be, it was dismissed. Like many other cruelty incidents presented before judges, the victim's advocates were let down and the defendants were relieved (Arluke and Luke 1997).

As a sociologist I was more concerned about the process that led up to the dismissal than the outcome itself. To study this process, I asked what the case meant to those present, as it unfolded in the courtroom, and I found that it had many different and conflicting meanings to the humane agents, the defendants, the humane society staff, and the reporters.

For the humane agents, the case represented their best investigative work and had the potential to validate their mission, if a guilty verdict were won. They felt their case was solid—the victim was a dog with

2 Introduction

severe and telling injuries, there was a reliable witness, and the abusers had no defense. However, the judge's actions made the agents feel dismissed if not belittled, reminding them that many people do not see them as "real" police because they "only" protect animals. To the abusers, it made no sense that people were so upset about their treatment of Willa, since it was *only* a dog and it was *their* animal. What was done to the dog, while undeniably violent, they saw as a form of play—akin to using racial epithets—that is understood to be inappropriate and offensive but far short of constituting serious crime. And for the staff from the local humane organization, Willa was an almost ideal cruelty case that could be used for promotion and fund raising. Although she was not quite appealing enough to get her picture on envelopes soliciting donations, the extraordinary efforts of the humane agents and veterinarians to bring the abusers to justice and save Willa's life, along with her in-house adoption by a popular employee of the humane society, gave staff members many reasons to feel proud about their work and unified in their mission to help animals.

That animal cruelty affects people is an old idea. As early as the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke (1693) suggested that harming animals has a destructive effect on those who inflict it. In later centuries, the psychologist Anna Freud (1981) and the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1964) argued that cruelty can be a symptom of character disorder. Children or adolescents who harmed animals were thought to be on a path to future violence because these acts desensitized them or tripped an underlying predisposition to aggression. Once their destructive impulses were released, the floodgates restricting violence opened and their future targets were likely to be human, or so it was argued.

When studies were undertaken to verify what is now known as the "link," results were mixed and sometimes misinterpreted to support this idea. Researchers had a hard time proving, for example, that Macdonald's (1961) "triad"—animal abuse, in combination with fire setting and bedwetting—leads to further violence. Macdonald (1968) himself failed to establish that violent psychiatric patients were significantly more likely than nonviolent psychiatric patients to abuse animals. In subsequent research, the evidence has been less than compelling (see Levin and Fox 1985), raising doubts about the validity of the link. For every study that purports to find a significant association between

cruelty to animals and the impulse to violence (e.g., Felthous 1980; Felthous and Yudowitz 1977; Kellert and Felthous 1985), there is another study that finds no link (e.g., Arluke et al. 1999; Climent and Ervin 1972; Felthous and Kellert 1987; Miller and Knutson 1997; Lewis et al. 1983; Sendi and Blomgren 1975). And in studies reporting significant findings in support of the link, methodological problems cast doubt on their results because they rely on self-reports of people who, from the study's outset, were seriously troubled or disturbed, and they treat violence as the sole dependent variable, even though other problems might be subsequently linked to prior abuse. Despite these doubts, researchers continue to replicate old study designs in an unrelenting effort to support this tired model (e.g., Merz-Perez and Heide 2004).

Indeed, if the link were valid, then the reverse should be too: kindness toward animals should predict compassion toward people. However, there are examples of people who are kind to animals but cruel to fellow humans. Some murderers, for example, show compassion to animals. The most famous case is that of Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, who shot a bartender, stabbed an inmate, and assaulted a prison guard while caring for the health of hundreds of canaries (Babyack 1994). And several members of the Nazi general staff, including Adolf Hitler, demonstrated extreme concern for animals in their personal lives as well as through the enactment of animal protection legislation (Arluke and Sanders 1996).

Nevertheless, many people continue to believe the link exists, in part because the idea has strong common-sense appeal and resonates with cultural stereotypes and myths about the origins of violent behavior (Piper 2003). In fiction writing, one of the most effective ways to create a mean, unlikable character is to have the person ruthlessly brutalize an animal because doing so must be a sign that humans are next in line to be harmed. Stephen King confesses that he used this imagery to portray just this sort of person for his book *The Dead Zone*. Speaking about his main character, Greg Stillson, King (2000, 193) writes, "I wanted to nail his dangerous, divided character in the first scene of the book. . . . When he stops at one farm, he is menaced by a snarling dog. Stillson remains friendly and smiling. . . . Then he sprays teargas into the dog's eyes and kicks it to death." In *The Secret Window*, King also establishes a character's evil nature by having him stab an unthreatening, sweet dog to death with a screwdriver. Riding this common-sense appeal and

4 Introduction

cultural resonance, activists have argued that cruelty should be prevented because it is a nodal event leading to further violence. By the end of the twentieth century, the link became the dominant focus of organizational campaigns against cruelty, such as the First Strike program of the Humane Society of the United States. Even those who do not care about animal welfare might now be concerned about preventing cruelty, given the urgency felt by many to identify adolescent “red flags” that signal a future violent adult.

Others argue that cruelty’s destructive impact on people occurs in organizations where society sanctions the harmful treatment of animals. Those who experiment on animals, for example, are thought to endure moral or emotional damage, even though their actions are institutionally approved. Presumed deleterious effects on human character formed the basis of antivivisection campaigns as early as the nineteenth century (Rupke 1987), when calls to end experimentation stressed injustice to animals as well as harm to scientists. The campaigners believed that using animals in painful experiments destroyed human sensitivities by forcing people to distance or coarsen themselves from the assumed suffering of lab animals.

Although most contemporary debate focuses on the moral basis for using or not using animals in experiments, some still claim that using animals in experiments has a negative effect on scientists and technicians. They suffer what is assumed to be lasting moral damage by becoming insensitive to the pathos of the lab animal’s situation (Diamond 1981). Yet even those who make this assumption acknowledge that if there is a patent lowering of moral sensitivity, compared with our ordinary attitudes about how animals should be treated, it occurs only in the laboratory (Nelson 1989). The damage, then, is at worst temporary and situational.

Only a few studies, however, have examined the impact of animal experiments on those conducting them, and irreparable moral or emotional harm seems unlikely. Even situational coarsening is debatable, across the board (Arluke 1988). On the contrary, while such work can be stressful at times to those who have direct and sustained contact with certain kinds of lab animals (Arluke 1999), many escape or transcend these negative effects by relying on institutional coping techniques that shield their identities from lasting harm (Arluke 1989, 1991, 1994a). Despite such findings, the belief that experimenting on animals

has lasting negative effects on experimentation still lingers and informs many pleas to end biomedical research (Langley 1989; Sharpe 1988).

Three assumptions underlie the belief that harming animals—whether criminal or institutionally sanctioned—has a destructive impact on human character. First, it is assumed that the meaning of harming animals can be independently arrived at and imposed apart from real-world situations where it occurs. Regulatory or legal approaches make this assumption as they belabor the formal definition of cruelty without considering its social context. For example, the 1911 Protection of Animals Act in England defines cruelty as the infliction of “unnecessary” suffering, but this definition ultimately depends on how people in specific situations understand the meaning of unnecessary. Early twentieth-century American state laws continued this ambiguous and context-free approach to defining cruelty (Favre and Tsang 1993), and most maintain the same language today. Massachusetts, for example, enforces a nineteenth-century code that considers “unnecessary” cruelty to include deliberate harm, such as overworking, beating, mutilating, or torturing animals, and neglect by failing to provide “proper” food, drink, shelter, and sanitary environment (Arluke 2004).

Researchers also define cruelty in abstract and socially ungrounded ways, whether focusing on the acts themselves or the motives behind them. Epidemiologists, for example, compile ever longer and more exhaustive lists of cruel acts (e.g., Vermeulen and Odendaal 1993), including burning, stomping, stabbing, and crushing, to name a few. Such list making is uninformed by the way these acts are interpreted by those who cause, fight, grieve, or accuse others of them. Psychologists, or those taking this approach, define cruelty on the basis of intent, or lack thereof, to harm animals (Rowan 1993). While this focus gets closer to the perspective of those doing it, the researcher’s thinking is still imposed on the actor’s voice; debates over what does or does not constitute abuse or neglect tell us little, if anything, about how it is actually defined on the streets or in police vehicles, animal shelters, people’s homes, humane society development meetings, or in the news. Additionally, psychological approaches are limited to the thoughts and actions of individuals, ignoring how mistreatment of animals is defined in social interaction in groups. People arrive at shared agreements about what words and concepts, such as cruelty, mean in given situations. In the end, academic definitions are just as detached from the real-world

situations where everyday actors make sense of cruelty as are regulatory and legal ones. What is missing are the voices of the people who encounter cruelty, however and wherever it occurs, as its meaning is decided upon and shaped to address their needs, concerns, and aims.

To capture this meaning, we must not rely on the abstract definitions and lists created by epidemiologists, legal scholars, and psychologists. Instead, we need to hear from those directly involved with cruelty, linking their responses to the larger social and cultural context that shapes whether and how much we appreciate or dismiss the well-being of animals. An interpretive process underlies these perspectives, since cruelty is the subjective experience of animals. The nature and extent of their distress cannot be directly comprehended by humans. One step removed from this experience, people interpret and react to it through various cultural and social filters. *Just a Dog* takes the spotlight off animal victims to consider how these filters shape the meaning of cruelty and, ultimately, shape how we see ourselves.

These understandings reflect, and in turn reproduce, a society that is uncertain and confused about the nature and importance of animals, at times according them high moral status and at other times less (Arluke 1989). Indeed, the entire fabric of human-animal relations is shot through with arbitrariness and anthropocentrism (Serpell 1996; Swabe 1996). Dogs, for example, are commonly beloved as “pretend” family members (Hickrod and Schmitt 1982) but also can be abused and neglected, used for sport, or experimented on as living test tubes (e.g., Jordan 1975). Farm animals, for another, can be shown a great deal of affection, almost as much as the traditional household “pet,” only to be “slaughtered” for food (Roth 1994). Even our perception and treatment of “lowly” mice is fraught with ambivalence; in laboratories their status can change from experimental object to pet to pest (Herzog 1988). Indeed, the debate over what to call animals—pets, companions, or nonhuman beings—is a further reminder that this ambivalence runs deep in our culture, leading me to avoid using these terms in the following pages.

In this confused moral context we come to know cruelty in all its contradiction and complexity—no longer just the deceptively simple definition put forward by psychologists or the apparently straightforward list of abuses codified in state laws. Rather, cruelty is something that people struggle to make sense of everyday in their private and professional

lives, making its meaning context-dependent, highly fluid, and to those outside these situations, at times baffling if not offensive.

A second assumption is that animal cruelty has a harmful effect on people, at least reducing their sensitivities, at most setting them on a course of future violence. But the effects of cruelty are not so simple; nor are they only negative. As we see in the following chapters, experiences with cruelty can be used to recast human identities in ways that do not dehumanize us or make us aggressive.

Human identity can be transformed in social interaction, whether with humans (Hewitt 2000; Mead 1934) or animals (Arluke and Sanders 1996). As people struggle to make sense of their experiences with cruelty, they begin to see themselves in a different light. They discover the worthiness or unworthiness of their thoughts, and the respectability or disrespectability of their acts. Thus, encounters with cruelty, like other social encounters, allow us to become aware of, affirm, and declare our humanness. As people undergo these encounters, however, they are not passive and uncreative actors. They do not merely take meanings and roles given to them; instead they redefine and adjust to them (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2003). As authors of meaning, people can define cruelty and exercise some control over how their definition influences their identities in every situation cruelty is encountered. If cruelty's impact varies from situation to situation, then there is no limit to the variety of ways that it can be used to shape identity, whether positively or negatively.

Using cruelty to create a self is an emergent and reflective process that often occurs in subcultures (Prus 1997) and in the course of situated activities (Blumer 1969). Unwanted identities imputed by others can be replaced when members of subcultures assert more favorable ones. For example, people who belong to a disfavored group, perform low-status work, or commit illegal or morally questionable deeds might use an encounter with cruelty to refashion their sense of self and present it to others in a positive light.

A final assumption is that only those who harm animals are transformed by cruelty. As we have seen, two groups of people, those whose harm of animals is culturally sanctioned and those whose harms is not, are thought to undergo identity change as a consequence of their interactions with animals. More commonly pictured are those who deliberately mistreat animals in ways that are criminal. Advocates of the link

view this untoward behavior as having a long-term, detrimental effect on the abuser's character and future identity. Less agreement surrounds those who work with animals in institutional settings where the use of animals, even though the law defines such use as proper, is considered cruel by some critics. Whether their treatment of animals is cruel or not, workers in animal laboratories or slaughterhouses, for example, are thought to undergo desensitization as a necessary coping device, if not more major changes to their identities over time.

The power of animal cruelty to transform the human self is much broader than what these examples suggest. Many different groups commit acts of cruelty and many others deal with cruelty in some manner, whether, for example, to prevent it, to punish abusers, to educate the public, or to mourn the victims. All the groups I examine in *Just a Dog* have members who develop their own definitions of cruelty and use these definitions to take on certain identities. I studied five groups, including law enforcement agents who investigate complaints of cruelty, college students who recall their "youthful indiscretions" with animals, hoarders who defend their self-worth from public criticism, shelter workers who battle with their peers over who is more humane, and public relations experts who use cruelty as a marketing tool for fund raising and education. I chose these groups because each exists in an arena where the meaning of cruelty, as well as the nature and importance of animals, are questioned if not contested. Agents, dispatchers, complainants, court officials, and alleged abusers disagree with one another about whether certain acts constitute cruelty; college students realize their former abuse would be frowned upon by many; hoarders withdraw from the community, in part because their way of life—which includes the neglect of animals—would be threatened if people knew about it; shelter workers indirectly accuse other workers of being cruel to animals; and humane society fund raisers and development personnel debate what makes a good or bad cruelty case for public consumption. And in each of these arenas, cruelty has special consequences for how people regard others and think of themselves.

The significance of animal cruelty in modern, western societies is greater than what these three assumptions suggest. Many different groups—however they define or approach cruelty—use it to build or frame their identities in positive ways. Critics will think it unsavory to propose that cruelty can have beneficial effects. Some may be troubled

because this proposal focuses on the human side of cruelty rather than on the animal's experience. While it is understandable and proper to focus attention on animals, since they suffer and die, cruelty is also experienced by people—many of whom are not themselves the abusers. Taking the spotlight off the animal victim means that *Just a Dog* is not a polemic against cruelty or an indictment of abusers. Instead it explores the topic without an ideological agenda by giving a voice to those who come face to face with the mistreatment of animals and are forced to deal with it—asking themselves whether what they see is cruelty, whether they or others are cruel, and whether they can approach or use cruelty in ways that make them feel better about themselves.

Others might be troubled because my approach suggests—at a social psychological level—that cruelty can have a positive impact. This suggestion will be considered heretical if misconstrued, even implicitly, to mean that cruelty should be encouraged or at least tolerated. However, by asking how people interpret and use cruelty in beneficial ways, my goal is not to condone it, just as analysts seeking to understand “evil” are not forgiving it (Staub 1989). Despite my intent, readers should be cautioned not to exonerate the perspectives described in *Just a Dog*, since understanding can unintentionally promote forgiving (Baumeister 1997; Miller, Gordon, and Buddie 1999), regardless of an author's caveat.

There are good reasons to study how groups define cruelty and use these definitions to create identities for themselves or others. To start, as in all social science research, it is valuable to explore these questions for the theoretical illumination that can result (Karp 1996). Although we know that identity is achieved through interpersonal human relationships, we are only beginning to understand the ways in which interaction with animals influences the self. In this regard, recent sociological studies are a most welcome addition to the emerging literature on human-animal relationships (e.g., Irvine 2004; Michalko 1999; Sanders 1999). However, the role that interspecies relationships play in the formation of identity needs further study, since sociologists have largely restricted their work to compassionate and caring relationships. We know relatively little about the impact on identity when the connection involves the “dark side” of our contact with animals (Rowan 1992), the side that involves abuse or neglect.

Just a Dog applies the sociological perspective of symbolic interaction to study how cruelty is defined in social interaction and how actors use

these definitions to shape identities for themselves and others. This approach argues that meanings, rather than being inherent in objects, events, and situations, are attached to them through human interpretation (e.g., Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). People respond to and make sense out of them in an on-going process of interpretation. Of course, some situations, such as those involving animal cruelty, are more unclear than others, requiring greater interpretive efforts to understand them, in turn inviting conflict over different interpretations.

There also are practical reasons why these questions merit study. Policy makers and the public at large are engaged in an active and ongoing debate about the moral and legal significance of animal abuse and neglect. For example, there is mounting pressure to reclassify cruelty under the law as a felony crime rather than as a misdemeanor, thereby stiffening penalties for violators; and there is growing interest in changing the law's view of mistreated animals as property, thereby recognizing some species as persons, not things, and allowing damages for loss of companionship or emotional distress (Francione 1995). This debate depends on the kind of information people have about cruelty, or what is defined as such, since groups understand its meaning in many different ways. *Just a Dog* describes the nature and extent of this knowledge as people generate and share their conceptions of cruelty with colleagues, peers, and the public or report it in the news.

Examining these questions also can be valuable to those who must deal, in various ways, with those who abuse or neglect animals. Law enforcement agents, veterinarians, psychologists, social workers, public health officials, neighbors, and family members encounter those who harm animals, although they approach them with different goals, whether that is to investigate their potential crime, report them to authorities, rehabilitate them, provide social and medical services, or simply help them cope more effectively with everyday life. Yet they all can benefit from a deeper understanding of how they shield themselves from scorn.

I studied these questions as an ethnographer of human-animal relationships. Using this approach, I immersed myself in my subjects' social worlds, to the extent that it was possible and necessary. At all times, I let these people author their own conceptions of cruelty, no matter how vague, shifting, or contradictory they were, and gave them

ample room to explore the particular significance that cruelty had for them. I was able to observe and interview more than 250 people. I listened to and watched humane agents as they investigated complaints in pet stores, farms, and people's homes, college students as they sat across from me in my office and either joked or cried about their former abuse, hoarders as they showed me around their animal and object-cluttered homes, praising their own efforts, shelter workers as they wondered whether their peers were being cruel to animals for either euthanizing them or not, and public relations experts in humane societies as they met in small conference rooms to plan the use of cruelty cases for education and fund raising. And I supplemented these observations and interviews with qualitative studies of newspaper reports about abuse and neglect cases.

My ethnographic goal was to capture their perspectives regarding the treatment of animals—both cruel and humane—not as individuals but as members of groups where they coordinate views and share plans of action (Becker et al. 1961; Mead 1938). Many of the people I studied belonged to groups whose common focus on animals involved working face to face with peers. These included humane agents, shelter workers, and humane society marketers. Not everyone, however, belonged to a group whose members had a sense of “we” when they interacted with animals. Years earlier some of the college students, in the company of friends, had harmed animals, but their current academic subculture had no such component. Hoarders, of all the groups studied, were the most isolated. Although some had friends who aided their efforts to amass animals, there was no wider subculture of hoarders in which they could participate. However, they too can be considered a group that shares—although not necessarily face to face—a similar set of understandings, assumptions, rationales, and expectations with one another as well as a similar set of coping skills to lessen the sting of criticism.

When studying group perspectives, it is not always possible to know whether they are genuine or not (Becker et al. 1961). Do people really believe what they tell us or is it just for public consumption? Sociologically, this uncertainty does not lessen the importance of shared perspectives as devices to give meaning and order to life, to ward off and neutralize public disapproval, and to direct and guide future behavior. Whether sheer ideology or authentic beliefs, whether transparent

justifications or genuine feelings, we know from the study of other group perspectives that they are a powerful influence on people's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Since the power of group perspectives is intuitively obvious to lay people, they often wonder how ethnographers can be comfortable and willing to study, up close, unsavory practices like cruelty. Friends and strangers alike asked how I could do this research. Wasn't I too disturbed by what I saw and heard to do this work, let alone remain impartial? Didn't I become furious listening to people regale me with outrageous reports about harming innocent animals? Shaking heads and rolled eyes were common. Some specifically questioned me because I could pay attention to things that "must be too awful to imagine." Just doing this research condemned me in their eyes, since if I could do it, there must be something wrong with *my* sensibilities. They argued that I must be as callous as my subjects because I could listen to them and try to understand their perspective.

I explained that I was a watcher and witness in the field, roles familiar to ethnographers (Bosk 1985). The roles of watcher and witness provided a convenient shield for my identity, leaving my sensibilities intact and reminding me that I was different from those studied. I was there to capture their perspectives, not to criticize them. And I was there to showcase their perspectives to the public, the humane community, and academe, not to endorse them. Despite attending to these roles, I did not like everything I saw and heard, but the roles enabled me to get through various situations that might otherwise have been more upsetting at the time. Though I was aware of the power of these roles, I sometimes felt it was too easy to hear about or see "bad things." Given what this tolerance might say about me, it echoed the fear that indeed my sensibilities had become blunted. That I needed to intellectualize my lack of response in the situation was itself comforting, telling me that I still cared but needed to put these feelings on hold. For example, I sometimes assumed that subjects exaggerated their cruelty or just made it up to shock me. Most of what I observed also did not upset me at the time, in part because I never actually saw animals being deliberately abused. Of course, I did see animals after they had been victimized, whether through abuse or neglect, and police showed me many photographs of harmed animals, but most of what I saw fell short of the malicious and senseless harm of animals that many people picture when

I tell them about my work. Like my subjects, I was not immune to the potential identity-changing impact of cruelty; it affects those who merely seek to understand it. I noticed this impact in the form of a role “side effect.” For example, listening to stories about animals being harmed briefly tainted my behavior. Immediately after interviewing some of the teenage abusers my actions became more aggressive, whether that was driving over the speed limit or being short with friends. I had so thoroughly entered into my subjects’ perspective to develop rapport that I exited the encounters a slightly different person, at least temporarily.

Friends and strangers had another question about my studying cruelty-related group perspectives. Rather than asking how I could conduct such research, given its emotional costs to me, they asked why should I do it, given the relative insignificance of cruelty when compared with more pressing human social problems. I heard this concern from fellow sociologists too, although in all fairness, studying human-animal relationships has only recently come into the fold of my discipline. Nevertheless, getting this reaction from academic peers stunned me at first because of sociology’s imperatives to examine and understand any encounter between two or more people. However, encounters between people and animals are not yet widely regarded as sufficiently important or interesting, sociologically, to merit the attention of researchers. This attitude should abate as sociologists show through their writing why these relationships are worth a close look (Arluke 2003). *Just a Dog* will, I hope, be part of this vanguard.

The five chapters that follow explore how groups—including but not limited to those who harm animals—shape the meaning of cruelty in social interaction and use this meaning to create identities for themselves and others. Chapter 1 asks these questions about humane law enforcement agents who investigate and prosecute complaints of animal abuse and neglect. I spent one year studying thirty “animal cops” and dispatchers in two large northeastern cities. Most of my fieldwork involved hundreds of hours of escorting agents as they drove to some of the five thousand cruelty complaints made each year. I was there as they spoke with “respondents” or “perps” and walked through their homes or businesses. When not on an investigation, I hung out with them in the department as they mulled over the day’s work, wrote reports, or just killed time.

When investigating these complaints, rookie agents think of themselves as a brute force having legitimate authority to represent the interests of abused animals. They see themselves as a power for the helpless, a voice for the mute. With more time on the job, this view changes. For the most part, their experience with cruelty is to see it trivialized. Rather than “fighting the good fight” against egregious cases of harm, agents are overwhelmed with ambiguous, marginal, or bogus complaints that barely qualify, if at all, in their interpretation as legally defined abuse or neglect. In the course of their work, agents also learn that the public does not know who they are, often regarding them as second-rate “wannabe” cops or closet “animal extremists.” Having a tainted occupational image with vague responsibilities and a suspect role leaves them with little authority in the public’s eye.

Hardly a brute force, agents adapt, at least at first, by assuming a role akin to humane educators as they try to make people into responsible pet owners. However, most agents feel that these informal educational efforts do not work and can, in fact, further impair their already low-status image. Respondents are seen as forgetful, ignorant, resistant, or dismissive when it comes to this instruction and the role of teacher seems to reinforce the misperception that they are not “real” police. Their long-term response to this problem is novel and creative. Agents use their symbolic skills to take advantage of the ambiguity of cruelty and their role as law enforcers. Referred to as the “knack,” they create an illusion of having more authority than they do to gain respondents’ cooperation. To further buttress the impression of power and authority, agents also suppress their emotions to separate themselves from animal “extremists.”

Chapter 2 focuses on late adolescents who harmed animals earlier in their lives, asking how they interpreted these “random acts of violence” and used these interpretations to feel adultlike. To explore this question, I interviewed twenty-five undergraduate students at a major urban eastern university who claimed to have deliberately harmed or killed animals outside culturally sanctioned experiences. They were mostly male, late teen, white, and middle- to upper-middle-class students with majors in a variety of liberal arts and technical subjects. None had ever been arrested for any unlawful behavior. According to surveys of college students, their ability to recount earlier animal abuse was not surprising. Between 20 and 35 percent of students claim to have harmed

animals during their childhood or adolescence (Goodney 1997; Miller and Knutson 1997).

Students recounted their animal abuse as a form of “play.” At first they described this play as “just” an idle activity because they limited its nature and scope, such as only tormenting an animal psychologically rather than physically. However, as students explored their memories, it was clear that they did not regard their former abuse as ordinary play. They remembered it as having a serious edge that distinguished it from everyday play in general or normal play with animals. Animal abuse was “cool” and thrilling because carrying it out was challenging and harming victims was “fun,” given their unpredictable but humanlike responses.

Far from being inexplicable or “senseless,” the students explained their prior acts in ways indicating that, at least sometimes, the harm of animals may be a formative and important event in a child’s emerging identity. As with other unsavory and objectionable behaviors that occur in adolescence, such as the use of sexual threats or racial invectives, children’s defiance can be part of their unfolding adult selves. Students recalled animal abuse as a means to try on and exercise adultlike powers from which they felt excluded, including keeping adultlike secrets, drawing adultlike boundaries, doing adultlike activities, and gathering and confirming adultlike knowledge. These recollections, however, were rife with contradictory views of animals that mimicked society’s inconsistent view of them as both objects and pets.

Chapter 3 examines hoarders—those who amass large numbers of animals only to neglect them—and how they are portrayed in the news, what image they provide of themselves, and why stories about them are newsworthy. I reviewed almost five hundred news articles between 2000 and 2003 about hoarding to understand the press’s transformation of this behavior into a social problem and to capture the hoarders’ perspective. I also interviewed hoarders in their homes so that I could see firsthand their life-style and their animals.

When the media reports hoarding to the public, the abuser’s private identity quickly becomes overshadowed as journalists summarize expert opinions about why people harm animals, how often it occurs, and what needs to be done to prevent it. Based on these opinions, reporters write stories about hoarders to make them newsworthy. In so

doing, journalistic conventions transform hoarders into three cultural archetypes: they are “bad,” “crazy,” or “sad” people.

Despite these negative images, hoarders use what the public sees as extreme neglect to craft a more favorable identity. When spoken to about their alleged mistreatment of animals, hoarders present an image that contradicts their overall portrayal by the press. They do this to reassure themselves and others that they are reasonable and good people, claiming to have nothing but the most humane motivations for collecting so many. In fact, they present themselves as saintly for making enormous sacrifices in the interest of helping scores of needy animals. The public’s identity also benefits from hoarding, although in a distinctively different way. Readers are shocked and horrified when they read these reports, but they are drawn to them because the stories allow people to consider and work through fundamental questions about their identities.

Chapter 4 looks at how “no-kill” shelter workers—those who consider euthanasia to be an inhumane approach to control animal overpopulation—use the rejection of cruelty as a way to return to their “true calling.” I carried out two hundred hours of observation and seventy-five formal interviews in shelters, animal control offices, and sanctuaries in two communities on opposite coasts of the country that have taken different approaches to the use of euthanasia, in one case seeing it as a necessary and humane while in the other as inappropriate and inhumane. I also attended the national meetings of the major humane organizations having conflicting opinions about this matter, examined press accounts and shelter publications relating to euthanasia, and combed Internet news groups that discussed shelter issues.

For most of the twentieth century shelter workers shared a common identity; they accepted euthanasia as the only humane way to deal with the vast number of cats and dogs that could not be placed in homes. In recent years, a rancorous debate has emerged within the humane community about the propriety of “no-kill” strategies that claim it is cruel to kill so many animals just because they are “old and ugly” or somewhat sick. By refusing to euthanize most animals, shelter workers have created a culture that permits them to have certain feelings that are problematic in shelters that routinely euthanize their charges. In a “cruelty-free” environment, no-killers can become attached to shelter animals and devote themselves to “rescuing” them without fearing their death.

Those critical of the no-kill approach feel under attack, now accused of being cruel, and retort by charging that no-killers are themselves cruel. These “open-admission” workers support the use of euthanasia to control overpopulation and contend that it is just as cruel to “warehouse” animals in shelters for months or years or to place them in homes where their proper care is not insured. While no-killers have rallied around their new cruelty-free identity, rediscovering the “true” meaning of being a shelter worker has divided what was once a more unified community, leaving an uneasy tension in its place.

Chapter 5 considers how serious and dramatic cases of cruelty can further solidarity within societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals (SPCAs) and between these organizations and their publics. To explore how these cases are selected and shaped, and why they benefit the humane community’s identity, I focused on the public relations and fund-raising staffs of two large eastern SPCAs. I interviewed people at length about their use of certain egregious cases of abuse and neglect to educate the public and raise money for their organizations. I also closely analyzed hundreds of letters sent by community members, hours of television video footage of these big cases, and scores of newspaper articles and letters to the editor that showed the nature and depth of support for the SPCA’s efforts, the plight of animal victims, and the ordeal of their owners.

The most horrific cases are discouraging to those who work in SPCAs and their supporters because their numbers never decline, abusers are often not found or brought to justice, and animals suffer and die needlessly. A certain type of cruelty case, however, is thought to be an extremely effective marketing tool because its features rouse the public’s interest in abuse and endorsement of humane efforts. Staff members search for and construct these “beautiful” cases by scouring the many instances of cruelty that are reported to the SPCA. Unlike the vast majority of incidents that occur, these special cases have very appealing animals that survive egregious abuse and get adopted into good homes with the help of determined humane agents, caring shelter workers, and skilled veterinarians.

“Beautiful” cases create solidarity. Internally, humane societies are often racked with the same kinds of division and conflict that occur in any large hierarchical organization: departments compete for scarce resources and staff members disagree over organizational policy and

practice. Also, staff members are disconnected from one another and disillusioned with the general mission of the society to combat cruelty. Beautiful cases present opportunities for all departments and staff members to put aside these tensions and problems and to work together and feel good about helping animals in need. For the many people outside the societies who support their mission but who have few opportunities to follow and get involved in specific cases, beautiful cases reassure them that these organizations are winning the battle against cruelty. These cases “rally the troops” to celebrate these rare successes and strengthen their identification with the organization.

The book concludes by asking why conflict and contradiction appear throughout *Just a Dog*. To better understand this confusion, I examined three egregious incidents of cruelty that captured widespread media attention—shelter animals beaten to death with baseball bats, a cat set on fire, and a dog crushed to death. These ugly cases expose the general public to the unseemly, sordid, and hopeless sides of cruelty. Animal victims are not always cute and appealing—unattractive pets and unpopular wild animals get tortured or killed. Happy endings almost never occur—abusers are rarely found and their victims usually do not end up healthy and adopted. Most important, abuse is often ghastly. And in addition to egregiously harming animals, people may be victims too.

Inspection of these three cases shows how thinking about animal cruelty is tied to our social context. Collective anxieties and fears filter the way people describe and understand cruelty. Because of this filtering, descriptions of cruelty are not conventionally “objective” or “factual”; they are narratives with many meanings and purposes, not all directly related to the harmed animal’s experience. They can also tell a story about the kind of people we are, the kind of society we live in, and the qualities that make us unique as living creatures. Nor are they always simple and consistent stories, because part of our shared identity is composed of modern apprehensions, doubts, and conflicts. These concerns, however inconsistent they are, must be teased out of the mix to help us better understand our confused thinking about the abuse and neglect of animals.

Taken together, these chapters will shake up long-standing agendas and assumptions about what cruelty is, how it affects us, and how it

should be thought about and studied. This impact will be greatest in the humane community. Those who formulate its policy have, for the most part, championed the cause of animals at the expense of conducting serious research on questions related to animal welfare and protection. In all fairness to such organizations, they do not claim to be in the business of scholarship. Their goals are more ideological than empirical, as evidenced in humane society publications and conferences that graphically portray numerous “abuses” and make assumptions about what constitutes cruelty and how it affects people. Moreover, discussions about the nature and consequence of cruelty have been left to advocates who have little scientific work to draw on when making recommendations to legislators, courtroom officials, law enforcement workers, teachers, and social workers. And the few studies that are relied on tend to be psychological and clinical. Sociological studies, whether empirical (e.g., Flynn 1999) or theoretical (e.g., Agnew 1998; Beirne 1997), have been slow in coming, but they are necessary to complement, and critique, the work of psychologists in this area.

I also wrote *Just a Dog* with the general public in mind. Future policy debates about animal cruelty must include an interested and informed public. Yet, at present, the public is ill-informed because of the paucity of scholarship on this subject. Much of what is available sensationalizes the alleged mistreatment of animals. Such a polemical approach does little to further our understanding of how people understand cruelty and understand themselves as a consequence. Exploring this question is no less important, even though some regard it as far less “sexy,” than detailing purported harm in scientific laboratories, slaughterhouses, or farms. By understanding how people make sense of cruelty and why cultural and social factors encourage its persistence, the public might be better equipped to debate and formulate policies to define and combat it.

Although I take an academic approach to this discussion and debate, rather than an impassioned and ideological one, some readers will still be upset by the book. Cases of cruelty are described in detail and the perspectives of abusers are faithfully reported. This may seem like too much information, but these descriptions are not gratuitous. *Just a Dog* is about the ways that groups construe the meaning of cruelty and its subsequent impact on them, so some forthright discussion, albeit

unpleasant or disturbing to consider, is necessary. I excluded many cases, far more unsavory than those that I report, to respect the sensitivities of readers whose distress over specific details would prevent them from thinking about the broader questions posed in the following pages.