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Recommended Citation

Owens, C.E., Davis, R., & Smith, B.H. (1981). The psychology of euthanizing animals: The emotional components. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 2(1), 19-26.

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The Psychology of Euthanizing Animals: The Emotional Components

Charles E. Owens, Ricky Davis
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Abstract

The emotional effects of euthanizing unwanted animals on professional animal control personnel are examined using written statements of and discussions among twenty-six euthanasia technicians at a workshop during a national session of the Animal Control Academy (Tuscaloosa, AL). Emotional conflicts arise in significant part from the dilemma that the same public which is responsible for the problem of unwanted animals also has a markedly negative perception of euthanasia, and by extension, of those who perform euthanasia. During discussions, the euthanasia technicians revealed a variety of strategies for coping with feelings of isolation, alienation and sorrow. These included intellectualization, avoidance of unnecessary contact with the animals, and belief that the animal is being spared greater suffering. The participants tended to place the burden of guilt attached to destroying healthy animals on irresponsible owners rather than on themselves.

As the American population has increased so has the number of pet owners and subsequent number of pets. This growing population of animals, specifically cats and dogs, has created additional responsibility for the field of animal control.

When animals are abandoned, mistreated, improperly supervised or pose a population problem, responsibility for monitoring, controlling, and caring for them falls on professional animal control personnel. Since it is impossible to find homes and provide continuing care for all animals, it then becomes necessary to put them to death. Euthanasia technicians are charged with the responsibility of providing a "painless" and "merciful" death. However, what may be a physically painless death for the animals may be a psychologically painful event for the euthanasia technicians.

To understand the psychological pain experienced by a person who must euthanize animals one must first understand the contradiction inherent in the job.

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Euthanizing animals is one of the most challenging and yet undesirable services performed by animal control personnel. On the one hand they must hold a special interest in the well-being of animals; on the other hand, they must purposely destroy animals. The task of killing an animal is further complicated by the fact that some animals disposed of are not necessarily dangerous, diseased or anti-social.

A considerable amount of information is available about the technical component of euthanization; however, very little is known about the human aspects. How does one justify the act of euthanizing animals? Is euthanization performed by individuals who are callous, insensitive and who enjoy the act of killing animals? Is this act performed by emotionally unstable persons who displace their frustrations and feelings of powerlessness onto helpless animals and thereby feel relieved and powerful? What are the emotional demands made on the animal control personnel who euthanize animals? These questions were formally addressed during a national session at the Animal Control Academy in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Results and discussion are presented below.

Background: The Dilemma of Euthanizing Animals

Historically, attitudes toward and treatment of animals grew largely out of religious, moral and metaphysical convictions (Singer, 1975). The Bible clearly defines the relationship between man and animal, suggesting that God gave human beings dominion over every living thing (Genesis 9: 1-3). One of the ways that humans exercise dominion over animals is by using them as a source of food. In fact, man's right to kill an animal and eat it has never been seriously challenged. Some individuals might not like the fact that animals are killed to provide food, but since meat is generally considered an important part of the daily diet, the objection to killing animals is minimal. Thus, those who kill animals for human consumption can see themselves as contributing to the maintenance and survival of the human race.

Another way that our society has exercised control over animals is by utilizing them in scientific research (Ryder, 1975). The fact that there are similarities between the physiology of humans and other animals led to the routine use of animals in scientific experimentation by the early 1800's. As a result of this practice, vital information about the operation of the human body has been obtained. Many scientific and medical discoveries that have contributed to improving the quality of human life have resulted from earlier experiments on animals. (Stanley et al., 1972).

However, even in the use of animals in experimentation there has been concern for humane treatment. The American Psychological Association's (APA) Committee on Precautions and Standards in Animal Experimentation formulated six principles to guide the use and humane care of animals. (APA, 1963). [These principles were last updated 3 September 1979 by the APA Committee on Animal Research and Experimentation. —*Ed.*] These principles require that unnecessary discomfort to animals be avoided whenever possible and any discomfort experienced should occur only when the researcher is convinced that it is necessary and justified by the significance of the research. This may not be viewed as an ideal use of animals; nevertheless, the fact that animal experimentation may prolong human life or improve the quality of human life makes it more acceptable.

The researcher or student can rationalize, even if the animal must be sacrificed, that he or she is doing it in the best interests of science and humanity. (Regan, 1976).

The situation is very different for the person who euthanizes animals. In contrast to those who kill animals for meat or use animals in experimentation, euthanasia technicians are very much aware that killing these animals would be unnecessary if society were more concerned with the living conditions of animals in America. Euthanizing animals under their jurisdiction is not performed to directly improve the quality of human life but to "clean up" society's inhumanity and insensitivity to animals. The "merciful" killing of unwanted, healthy or unhealthy animals reflects people's failure to exercise control over animals in a responsible manner.

Ironically, it seems that the public does not accept its culpability in the process and, in fact, frowns at those who perform such acts. The dilemma faced by many euthanasia specialists, then, is how to cope with negative feelings engendered by taking the lives of animals. How do they maintain a positive self-image when performing a task that is made necessary by the public, but at the same time perceived negatively by the public?

Sample and Setting

Twenty-six persons who perform euthanasia attended a three-day Animal Control Academy training session for euthanasia technicians at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. One-half of the group had just completed a two-week basic training course for animal control officers also offered by the Academy. As part of their training, all twenty-six participated in a two-hour workshop entitled "The Psychology of Euthanasia." The individuals were from different parts of the country, and they brought with them a variety of different experiences in animal control handling. The ages of the participants ranged from late teens to late fifties.

Procedure

The main objective of the workshop was to allow participants to express their feelings and concerns about euthanasia in a supportive environment. Since it was clear that a lecture on a subject as delicate and sensitive as killing animals was not the most appropriate way to facilitate the expression of feelings in a short period of time, two techniques were utilized.

First, two days before the workshop, the Training Session Coordinator requested that participants write about their feelings on the subject of the euthanasia of animals. The responses were collected and subsequently analyzed.

Second, the format for discussion during the actual session was stimulated by seven statements in a consensus statement form. The statements were selected because of their rather general and nonthreatening nature. The participants were given the consensus statements and asked to select one of four responses that most nearly reflected their feeling. The responses were: strongly disagree, mildly disagree, mildly agree, and strongly agree. For discussion purposes, the "mildly" and "strongly" are combined and the responses are presented as either

agree or disagree categories. In order to minimize shallow and flippant responses, participants were told that they would be required to justify their selection to the larger group.

Participants completed their statements individually. Afterward, each person was assigned on a random basis to groups of four. A leader chosen for each group was given the task of keeping the group focused on each statement, facilitating conversation, and ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to express their reasons for selecting a response. Each group was directed to arrive at a group consensus (agreement) for each statement. While group agreement was highly desirable, prior experience with consensus statements has shown that some statements might not yield agreement. This was acceptable, as one of the real values of the statements was to stimulate discussion. Group leaders summarized their group's selections and reported these to the larger group.

Results

Consensus Statements

1. Euthanizing animals is a needed service for the community.
2. It takes a special type of person to euthanize animals.
3. I believe in the use of the death penalty for criminals.
4. It's much easier to euthanize animals if a person is aware of this responsibility before he/she accepts the job.
5. The community appreciates the fact that you are performing the service of euthanizing animals.
6. The thing to do after you finish euthanizing animals is to go somewhere by yourself and relax.
7. The feeling one experiences most in euthanizing animals is guilt.

There was almost unanimous agreement among the groups that they were performing a necessary service for the community (1). There was equally strong agreement that the community did *not* appreciate or understand their mission (5). In fact, some participants admitted that they tried to avoid discussing the details of their job with individuals in social settings primarily because a discussion eventually led to a negative reaction from others.

The participants generally agreed that a special type of person is needed to euthanize animals. The qualities generally ascribed to these individuals were positive traits, such as compassion, understanding and the ability to meet the public (2). Individuals who were insensitive to pain and suffering or who enjoyed killing animals were not considered desirable.

The statement on the use of the death penalty on criminals provoked the most heated debate and the most disagreement (3). Individuals took both extreme positions. One conclusion that evolved from the debate was that animal control personnel viewed euthanizing animals and the use of capital punishment on humans as completely unrelated. It appears that killing animals has made them neither more nor less favorably inclined toward the death penalty.

Knowing that they might be required to euthanize animals as part of the job did not seem to make the actual performance of the act less painful or less stress-

ful (4). When it came time to euthanize animals there were still unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings.

A great deal of diversity about how to cope with feelings that result from euthanizing animals (6) was expressed. Individuals seemed to defuse negative feelings in very different ways. Some preferred to be in the company of others while others found it less stressful to be alone. To relax, a few resorted to drinking; others preferred physical activity. Clearly, how one chose to cope with feelings which resulted from euthanizing was an individual matter.

Guilt was not considered a commonly felt emotion (7). Although some admitted to feelings of guilt, these feelings were often mixed with stronger feelings of sympathy and sorrow. Participants generally spoke of feelings of sorrow when the animals had to be killed, but did not express guilt because fault for the animals' death was not theirs. To put it simply, they were performing an unpleasant yet necessary service.

Written Statements

The written responses proved to be consistent with the results of the consensus statements and provided additional insight into how specific individuals cope with the task of euthanizing animals. Various coping strategies are employed by euthanasia technicians to cushion the trauma and unpleasant feelings that accompany the act of euthanasia.

Permeating most responses was the theme of protecting oneself from the full impact of the act by isolating one's feelings from the act. Some accomplished this by talking about euthanasia of animals formally or intellectually. Technicians wrote:

"You have to be rational about this and consider the seriousness of animal overpopulation."

"I fully realize that it is a job that has to be done and there is no way out of it."

Some technicians even believe not only that death is in the animals' best interest but that euthanasia specialists are the best persons to perform this service.

"I would rather (euthanize the animals myself than leave it to) someone who doesn't know what they are doing."

"I have no qualms about it because the animal is suffering and I am doing the animal a favor."

Others stated that they control their emotional involvement by consciously avoiding physical contact and interaction with the animals.

"I avoid looking at the animals or getting attached to them."

"I can't stand the feelings of death in my hands so I just don't think about it or even look at the animals."

"I take a mechanical approach in that I do not (or try not) to be very familiar with the animals that I may have to destroy, which works 90% of the time."

Placing blame on society for the plight of animals seems to minimize feelings of guilt expressed by animal care personnel.

"Those owners should be ashamed of themselves bringing these animals in to be killed."

"I find myself calling pet owners every name in the book sometimes."

"I feel anger at the people who bring these animals in and then blame us for killing them."

"I feel anger when I see the car pull in with the back seat full of puppies because I know what's going to happen to them."

The anger is usually directed, if only mentally, at pet owners; however, some technicians displace their anger and it invades their personal life.

"When I put an animal to sleep I get so angry with my friends and relatives and end up alienating myself from them when they don't try to understand."

"My home life was on the edge of destruction."

"I have not found that I can talk about this subject in any depth with my friends without resentment on their part."

For some, the process of euthanasia awakens unpleasant emotional memories. Statements reflective of this are:

"I know how it feels to be unloved because I was unloved as a child and sometimes even now."

"It makes me feel so inadequate and insecure."

"I can understand what animals feel when they are not cared for because I have been there."

In spite of the unpleasantness of the job, or their personal feelings, many find ways to accept the unacceptable (Hilgard et al., 1975):

"I don't think about it because it's my job."

"At first it used to bother me, but I've gotten used to it."

"After 5 years I have come to the realization that I am doing the animal a favor."

While some may be able, eventually, to get accustomed to and accept euthanizing animals by using different coping strategies, there were a few who admitted readily that the negative feelings will continue and that nothing will help.

"I'm never going to get used to killing animals."

"Everytime I put an animal to sleep I feel like a murderer, especially when the animals are perfectly healthy."

Discussion

The results of this inquiry clearly show that many euthanasia technicians feel that they are performing a service which is thankless and undesirable, but necessary. This condition is certain to create feelings of ambivalence, insecurity and emotional conflict. It is evident that individuals are emotionally affected by euthanizing animals.

Equally obvious is the fact that euthanasia technicians feel somewhat alienated from others in the larger community who do not euthanize animals. They feel that they cannot discuss their occupation in social settings and receive positive responses from those who are not in the field of animal care and control (Smith, 1980). Consequently, many find it necessary to create clever and evasive responses to inquiries about their job or tend to restrict their socialization to other animal control personnel. Unfortunately, the technician may also feel isolated from other animal control personnel because they also may not be sympathetic to the role of the technician.

An additional source of frustration for some is that they find it difficult to discuss their jobs or their feelings with family members. This means that the traditional support of groups that most individuals use to help them through emotionally stressful periods may not be available for euthanasia technicians. All cope as best they can using a variety of strategies.

Conclusion

It seems evident that technicians performing euthanasia on animals feel a need to vent their concerns about animals to the public (to get support and understanding from society at large as well as from their co-workers); to find constructive and effective methods for dealing with the feelings that accrue from killing animals; and to have a continuous support group that is not only sympathetic to their dilemma but also shares other similar professional concerns. There are a number of ways that animal control and animal welfare agencies can help euthanasia specialists deal with euthanizing animals and the resulting negative feelings. Some of the more obvious are:

1. Allow time at staff meetings for technicians and other personnel to exchange their ideas and feelings on the topic of euthanasia.
2. Arrange speaking engagements to interested groups, organizations and classes explaining their position and the public's responsibility in making euthanasia necessary. This helps the general public to understand the euthanasia technicians' dilemma and provides a chance for animal care personnel to vent their frustrations and concerns.
3. Encourage employees to become involved in daily activities, hobbies, and situations that allow individuals opportunities to relax and to cope with the anger, frustration or ambivalence connected with euthanasia. This is especially important during the hours after work.
4. Permit technicians to attend yearly meetings that focus on both the human and technical aspects of euthanizing animals. This helps the individual to identify with a continuing support group.

While these recommendations will help euthanasia specialists cope effectively with some of the emotions they experience and will provide an atmosphere of professionalism, the dilemma remains.

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