

A qualitative study of children's cruelty to animals:

Uncovering the roles of trauma, exposure to violence, and attachment

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Animal Guardians

Promoting Positive
Child and Animal
Relationships



Overview

- **Animal cruelty in children**
 - Psychological risk factors and motivations
 - Animal Guardians intervention
- **Interview**
 - Structure, techniques
- **Methods of Analysis**
 - Content Analysis
 - IPA
- **Results**
 - Relationships and understanding of cruelty
 - Factors contributing to cruelty (IPA)
- **Hypothetical Model** and overall findings
- **Recommendations** for Intervention

Childhood Animal Cruelty

- Links to other forms of violent behaviour and behavioural disturbances, esp. Conduct Disorder (and Callous Unemotional traits) (Gullone, 2012)
- Systematic review: Psychological risk factors associated with animal cruelty (Hawkins, Hawkins, and Williams 2017)
 - **Environmental risk factors** including: abuse, neglect, witnessing animal cruelty, bullying and victimisation
 - **Psychological risk factors** including: Conduct Disorder, low empathy, personality factors.
 - Can have very early onset (4-5 years old)
- Very few studies interviewing children directly about cruelty behaviour (mostly retrospective)
 - McDonald et al. (2018):
 - Contextual factors around Family violence, pet neglect
 - Anthropomorphizing animal minds
 - Motivations around punishment and curiosity





Interview Structure and Procedure

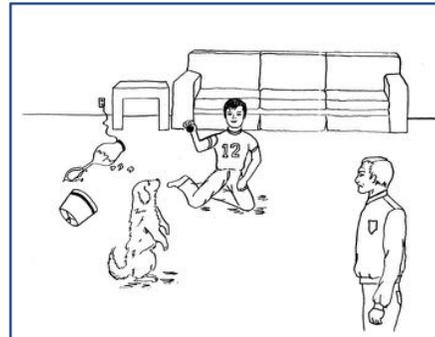
I. Rapport Building

- Child discusses their family and relationships



II. 'Animals-at-Risk' TAT

- child can give their interpretation



Shapiro et al. (2013); Deviney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983)

III. Open Questions

- Child's understanding of kindness and cruelty

IV. Vignettes

- Tailored to each child's case



V. Child Animal Interview (CAI)

Dadds et al. (2004)

Final Sample

- Recruitment was mid-May to end October 2018 (first five months of the program)
 - 30 referrals
 - 20 were within the inclusion criteria (age and location)
 - 16 were eligible to have research consent sent to their parent/guardian
- Consent received for **10 children** (63%)
- Average age= 8.8 years, n=9 males



Analysis: Two levels of Coding

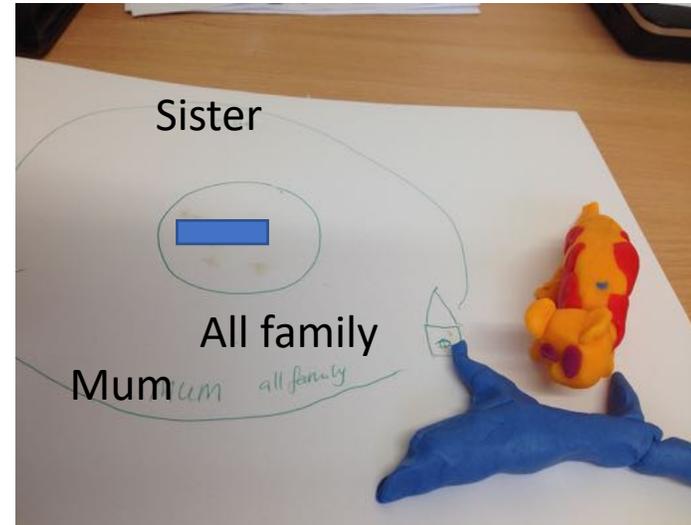
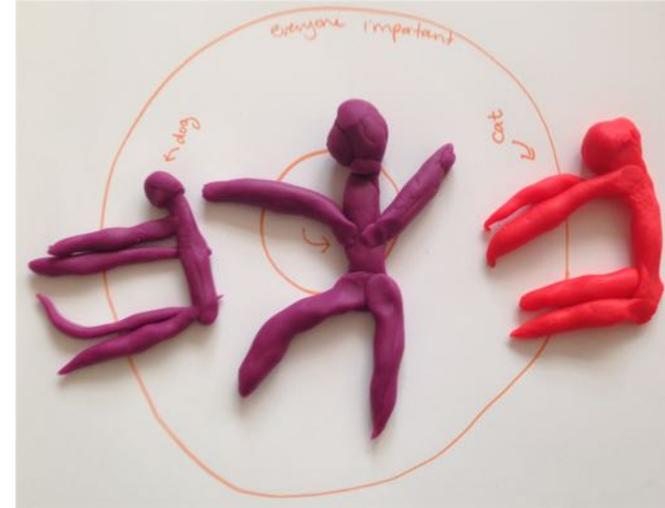
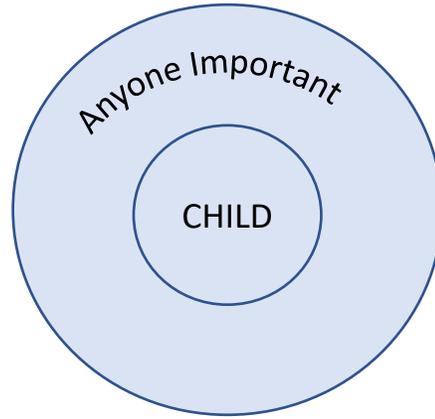
Qualitative Analysis Techniques

- Content Analysis
 - Categorize and count children's answers
 - More 'objective' and less 'subjective'
 - Inter-rater reliability (95.2%)
- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
 - More interpretative (including psychological interpretation)
 - Allows integration of concepts and broad overview of issues emerging throughout the interview
 - Audit procedure

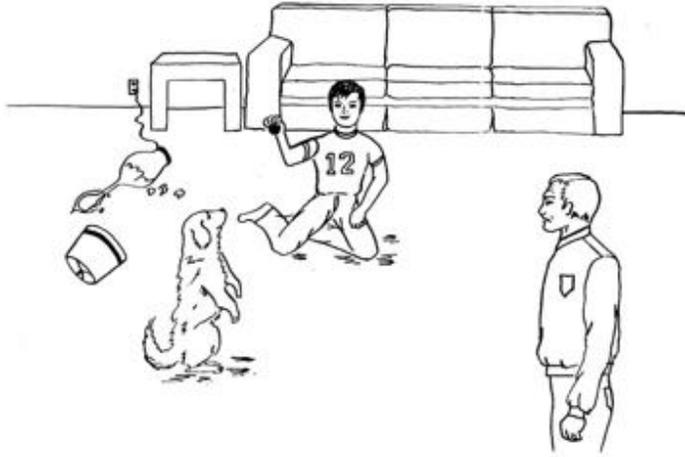
Results: Child Relationships

Content Analysis

- Did the child make him/herself?
 - Yes (n=9)
 - No (n=1)
- What family members did the child include?
 - Mum (n=7)
 - Dad (n=2)
 - Pet (n=4)
 - Other animal (n=2)
 - None (n=1)



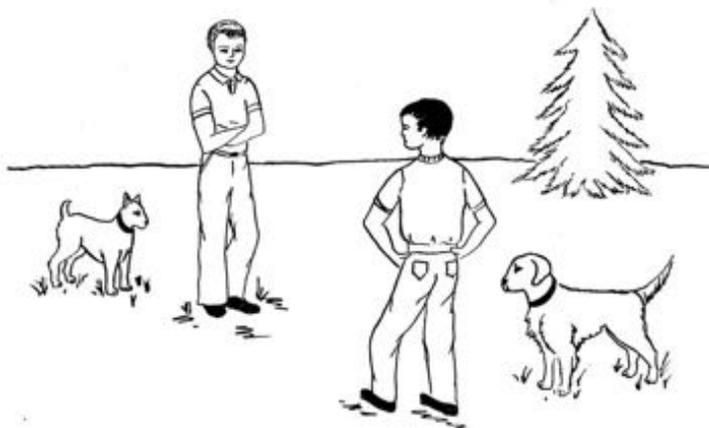
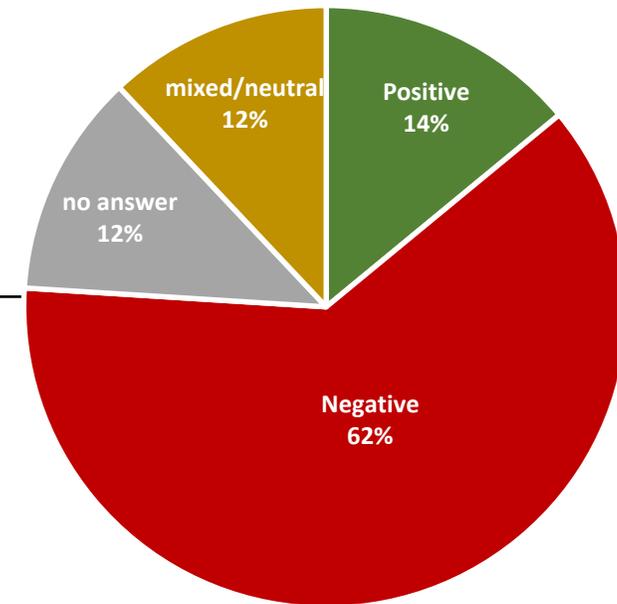
Results: Image interpretation



- Outcomes
Positive (n=1)
Negative (n=9)

- Human emotion
Positive (n=2)
Negative (n=5)
Mixed (n=3)

Outcome Classifications (all images)

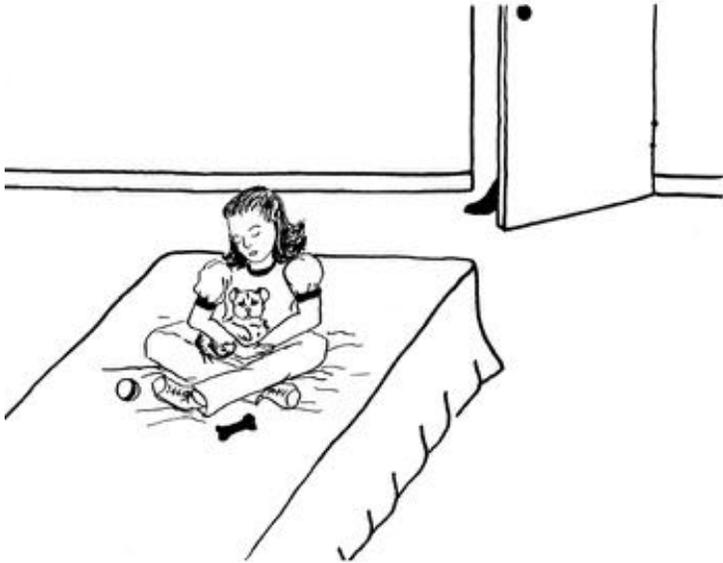


- Outcomes
Positive (n=3)
Negative (n=6)

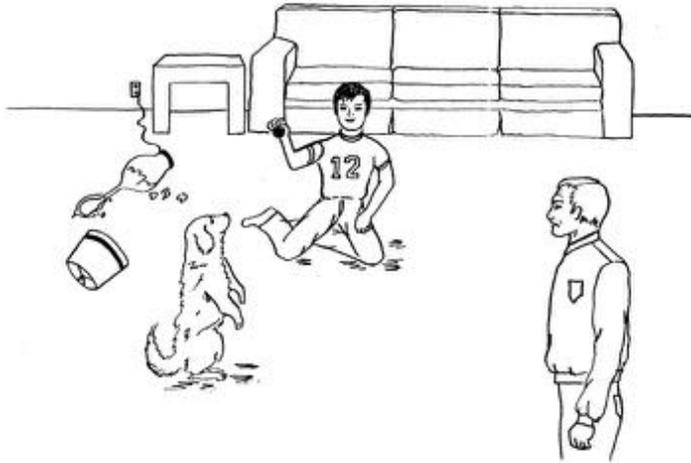
- Human emotion
Positive (n=3)
Negative (n=6)

(one was not code-able)

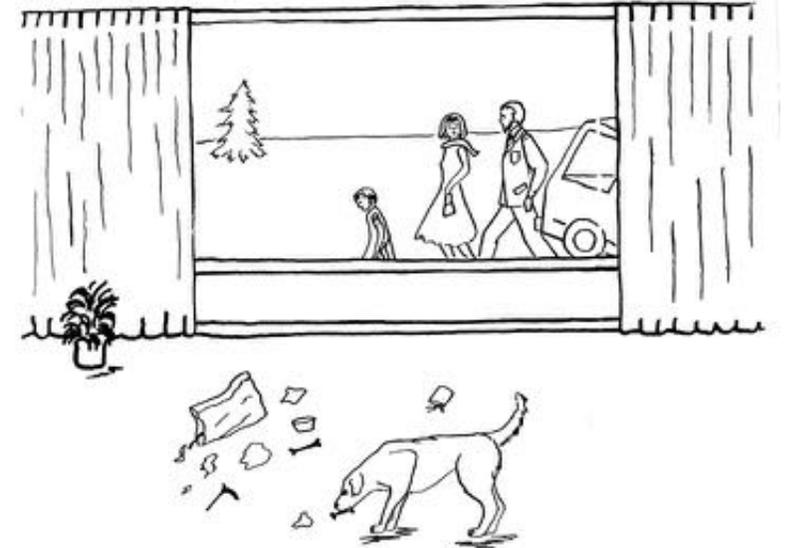
Quotes from image interpretation



“so that’s probably this dead girl, and that might be her dad or something, and is that a dog or a cat in her hand or something?”



“and then someone is going to trip over it or something and they are going to cut their feet on the glass”



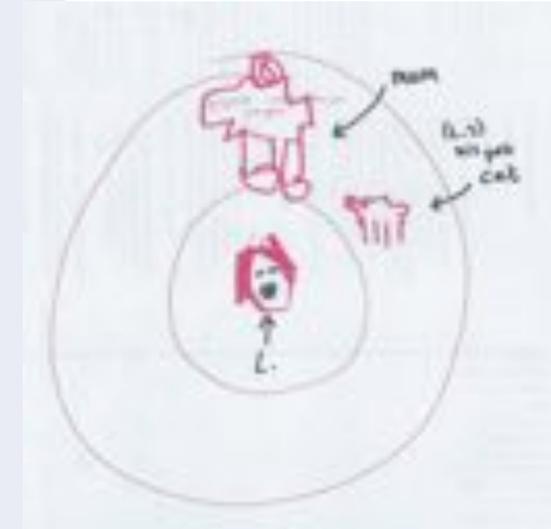
I: and so what do you think is happening?
L: uhmmm... they are going to get the dog to kennels
I: why are they going to take the dog to the kennels?
L: uhmmm because he’s being bad?

Results: Open Questions

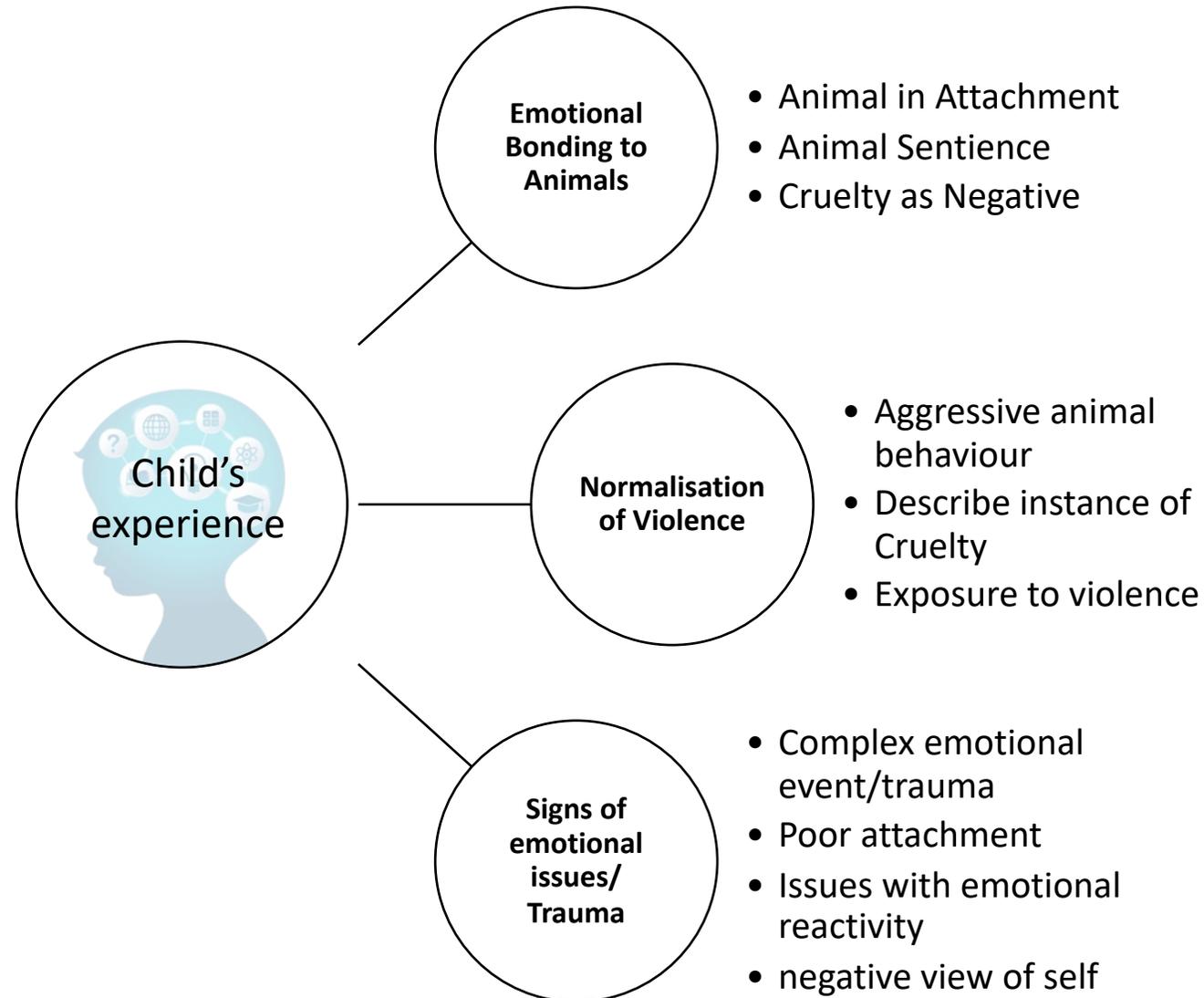
Question and categories	Answer frequency
What does it mean for a human to be hurt?	
Bad	3
Sad/ Angry	3
Pain	2
Help them	1
Don't know	1
Is it the same when an animal is hurt?	
Yes	8
Worse to hurt an animal	1
No answer	1
What do you think makes someone want to hurt animals?	
Emotional reason	2
Punishment	3
Intrinsic to self	1
No answer	4

Results: Child Relationships (IPA)

Transcript	Code	Theme
<p>I: right let's draw you L: uhm my face.... Black eye balls... the black hole out of your eyes [...] I: Is that your mouth? L: black hole of death [...]</p>	<p>Negative description of Self</p>	
<p>I: but let's finish this, so you said your mummy, do you want to draw your mummy? L: OK ... she loves red so I'm going to draw her evil! I: and do you get on with your mummy? L: sort of, I kind of hate her but please don't tell her I: no no I won't say</p>	<p>Insecure/ disorganized attachment</p>	<p>Signs of emotional issues/ trauma</p>



IPA Results: Themes and sub-themes



Emotional Bonding to Animals

Interviewer: ...if you wanted to put the few most important people in your life ...who would you put outside?

George: Dumb Dog

Interviewer: Dumb dog (laughing) ...Does he look like that? Is it a he or she?

George: He... chocolate Labrador... when it was a puppy I had to teach it how to go up and down the stairs and then I went up to get my covers



Normalisation of Violence

Harry: but I have to [hit the cat] do it because he's being bad. I wish I had brought my cat up like even worse

Interviewer: why?

Harry: because I mean like even when we're sleeping, I never slap him actually, it's my mum who slaps him

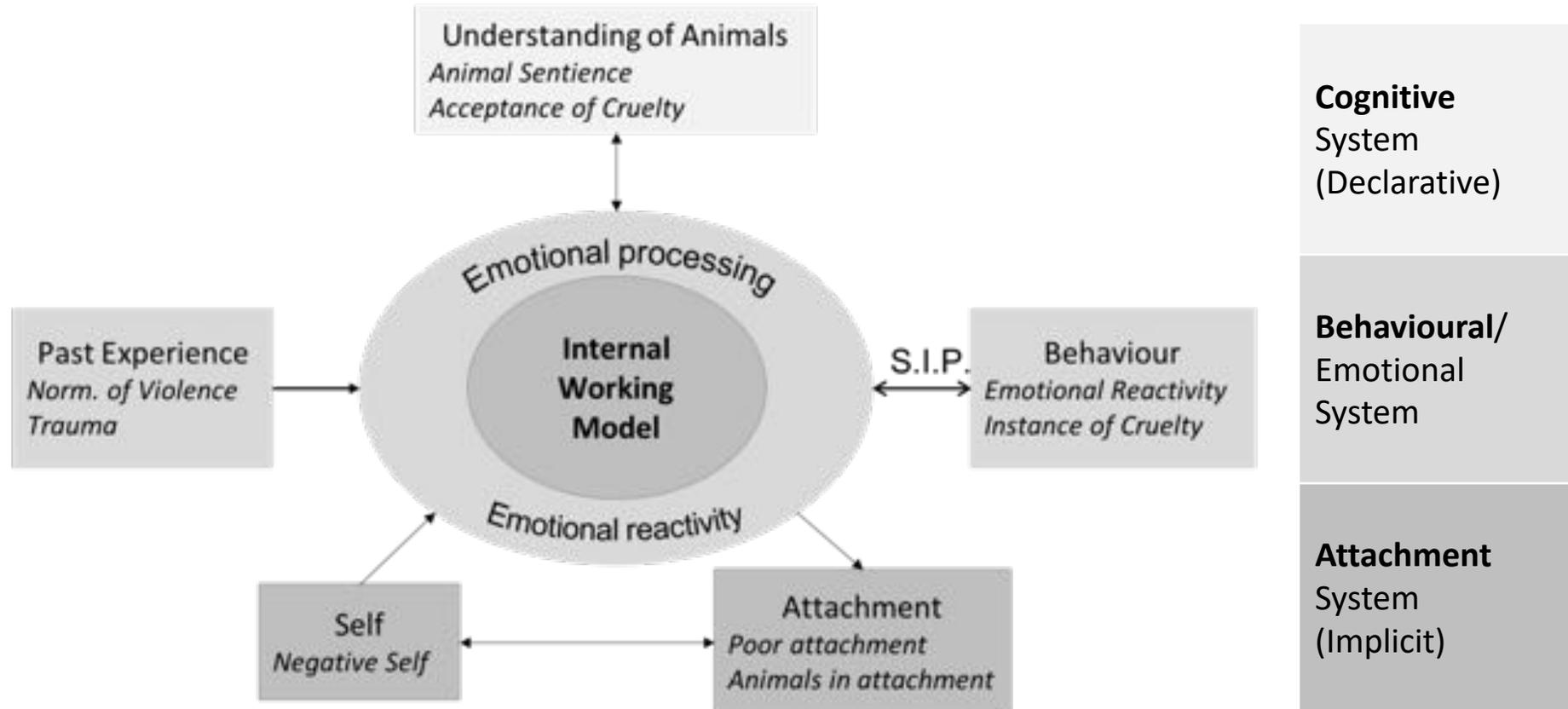
Interviewer: oh your mum slaps that cat? And... both cats?

Harry: I just slap him when he's being like, too good to her and like fight her fight her, charge at her

Signs of Emotional Issues/trauma

A: It lived still... It's body... it's leg, they gave it some medicine... to make it go to sleep (mm-hmm) and then they cut it's leg open because it's bone was broken, and then they took it's little bone out, and they took a bone off a bird, and gave it all the right size, and then put in the leg, and they tied it up, so then it was...

A 'model' of cruelty behaviour?



Recommendations for Intervention?

- Children **liked** animals
 - They did not necessarily have negative attitudes/emotions towards them
 - Children were **often attached to animals**



- Important to reinforce animal sentience and highlight needs
- This may be an emotionally charged topic, where attachment issues are involved

- The **issues** were generally:
 - Issues with emotional reactivity/lashing out
 - Normalisation of violence
 - Inappropriate behaviour
 - Pets in attachment and family context
 - Animal cruelty can be stigmatized and even traumatic



- Target behaviour change and give the child the tools they need to act more safely around animals



- Some issues cannot be targeted by educational interventions (e.g. attachment or trauma)
- Family/ peer context

Directions for Future Research

- Quantitative approach:
 - Referred vs. Comparison (vs. possible waiting list control)
 - Pre and Post test on major Dimensions
 - Knowledge: Emotion recognition, needs, responsibility
 - Behaviour: Impulse control, understanding scenarios
- Outstanding questions
 - Effects of population/culture?
 - Integrating animal cruelty with broader psychological models?

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