Animal Hoarding Disorder: A new psychopathology?

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to characterize the sociodemographic profile of animal hoarders in a southern city of Brazil. In addition, it aimed to propose Animal Hoarding Disorder as a new nosological category, distinct from Hoarding Disorder. Thirty-three individuals with Animal Hoarding Disorder, 73% female and 60% elderly, composed the sample. The average age of the sample was 61.39 years (SD = 12.69) and the average period that individuals hoarded or lived with a large number of animals was 23.09 years (SD = 15.98.) It was observed that 56.7% of the sample hoarded other inanimate objects, besides the animals. The total number of hoarded animals was 1.357 and the average number of animals per hoarder was approximately 41 (SD = 24.41). Significant differences between hoarding disorder and animal hoarding are discussed. Unlike hoarded objects, hoarded animals generally do not obstruct domicile environments. The processes of disengaging from or donating animals also differ from those of object hoarding, since there is an affectional bond with lives and not with unanimated objects. In this sense, the characterization of Animal Hoarding Disorder as a new mental disorder may arouse great interest from both clinical professionals and researchers.

1. Introduction

The main characteristics of Hoarding Disorder are considered a possible symptom of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) or Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), according to the fourth revised version of DSM, part of the chapter of Anxiety Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2002). With the publication of the DSM-5, OCD was removed from that group and became the protagonist of a separate chapter. Then, it became a separate nosographic entity, entitled "Hoarding Disorder" (HD), which is included in this new section entitled "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Related Disorders". The main characteristics of Hoarding Disorder are the difficulty in disposing objects and suffering associated with their discard.

Animal Hoarding is characterized as a special manifestation of HD (American Psychiatric Association, 2014) and a psychopathology with significant impact on the functioning of individuals (Svanberg and Arluke, 2016). The first scientific reports of people living with many animals appeared in 1981, with the researchers Worth and Beck (1981). These authors denominated these individuals as "owners of many animals", describing them as low-income people who lived alone in unhealthy conditions. A large number of animals occurred due to constant collecting, uncontrolled reproduction and the inability of individuals to donate them (Worth and Beck, 1981).

Patronek (1999) was the first researcher to propose diagnostic criteria for individuals who were denominated as "animal hoarders" and presented this condition as a public health problem. The researcher characterized these individuals as people who: 1) hoarded a large number of animals; 2) failed to provide minimum necessary conditions for nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care; 3) failure to act on animals deteriorating state or on the negative effect of hoarding on their own health and well-being and the health of other family members.

Over the years, researchers have defined animal hoarding according to the criteria of Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC), created in 2002 in the United States of America (Joffe et al., 2014; Ockenden et al., 2014; Reinisch, 2009). The diagnostic criteria of HARC (2002) observed the same criteria proposed by Patronek (1999), with the addition of a criterion that refers to the inability to recognize the negative consequences of hoarding.

Hoarding Disorder is considered a complex phenomenon that causes problems of public health and legal impasses (Bratiotis et al., 2011).

The interest of the scientific community about the characteristics of this psychological condition is evident since several documentary studies developed in different countries have been published (Frost et al., 2015). However, the current scientific literature presents a lack of empirical studies on the phenomenon of animal hoarding (Saldarriaga-Cantillo and Rivas Nieto, 2015; Steketee et al., 2011).

The present study aims to characterize the sociodemographic profile of individuals who hoarded animals in Porto Alegre. In addition, it discusses and presents specific diagnostic criteria for Animal Hoarding Disorder, opening the discussion about the possibility of a new psychopathology distinct from Hoarding Disorder, with specific diagnostic criteria.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This is a cross-sectional and exploratory study.

2.2. Participants

The sampling process was for convenience, the Municipal Secretariat for Animal Rights (*Secretaria Municipal dos Direitos dos Animais - SEDA*) of Porto Alegre - a municipal agency whose purpose is to establish and execute public policies for health, protection, defense and animal welfare. A survey of potential hoarders residing in Porto Alegre was performed. *SEDA* identified 75 cases of potential animal hoarders in the city of Porto Alegre. From there, the information about these individuals was available to the researchers.

Between August 2015 and May 2016, the researchers visited 75 houses where 48 individuals were contacted. In other 27 houses, the contact was not even possible. In 14 houses the residents were not found, even after two visits on different days. In other 13 residences, the individuals were not living in the area. After the research presentation, only 38 individuals agreed to participate. We included the 38 individuals who agreed to participate in the study and fulfilled all the inclusion criteria established by the exploratory strategy. These individuals were preliminarily identified by *SEDA* and were within the 75 constituent cases of the target population. It should be noted that those individuals who had the following conditions, which interfered with interviewing and testing, were excluded: communication problems, auditory and visual problems that were evaluated in the initial dialogues of the approach, from the filling of the Sociodemographic data sheet.

Participants should fill the diagnostic criteria of DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2014) for Animal Hoarding Disorder to be included in the research: (1) hoarding of many animals; (2) failure to provide minimum standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care; (3) failure to act on the deteriorating condition of animals (including disease, hunger or death) and the environment (e.g. overpopulation, extremely unhealthy conditions).

All individuals who agreed to participate in the survey also allowed veterinarians to assess the health status of the animals. Among the 38 individuals evaluated, three of them did not fill the criteria necessary for the diagnosis of Animal Hoarding Disorder, since the animals were in good nutrition and general health conditions. The environment was also in good condition, including sanitation. In addition, individuals provided minimal veterinary care and recognized the difficulties due to a large number of animals. One participant was excluded for presenting speech impairment, which was impossible to collect data and another participant who presented the diagnosis of schizophrenia, which is an exclusion criterion (American Psychiatric Association, 2014).

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Sociodemographic data sheet

included the following variables: age, sex, marital status, education, housing situation, relatives or support network. History of physical and mental illnesses, health perception, current occupation, number and species of animals in the residence, period in which individuals started to hoard animals and if other objects were hoarded were also investigated.

2.3.2. Semi-structured interview

characteristics of individuals with hoarding disorder were investigated, such as: How many animals do you have at home? When did you start having animals in your house? Why do you collect animals? Who buys animal food? Who supplies the house? Are the animals castrated? What was the last animal adopted? How old are the animals? Do animals have names? What care and activities do you usually do with animals? What is your favorite animal? Do you collect/store anything (building material, etc)? When do you need help, who can you count with? Is it common for people in your community to leave pets in front of your house? and Do you usually go to parties, lunches, etc?

2.3.3. Report of veterinarians

a report for each residence visited was provided by the veterinarians of Special Secretariat for Animal Rights (*SEDA*), which evaluated the health conditions of the animals.

2.4. Procedures for data collection

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of PUCRS (CEP - PUCRS) under the CAAE: 44489715.8.0000.5336. Contacts were made with the participants through home visits and the participants signed the Informed Term Consent (*Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido - TCLE*). Participants individually answered the assessment tools, which was approximately one hour and thirty minutes long. The evaluations were conducted by the project coordinator and the auxiliary team, formed by psychologists and psychology research interns, previously trained to assist in the application of the instruments and the interview. Visits to the houses of the potential hoarders were accompanied by a veterinarian and a *SEDA* supervisor. The *Promotoria do Meio Ambiente do MPRS* offered transportation for the researchers, by prior appointment, to have access to residences of the participants.

The instruments were applied inside the houses visited or inside the vehicle available by the Public Ministry of Rio Grande do Sul, when there were not physical and sanitary conditions for conducting the evaluative process in the residences. During the evaluation of the participants, animals were examined and treated by veterinarians, who produced formal reports informing about the animal and the environment conditions, which were also used to produce this article. Animals identified in need of specialized treatment or castration were removed to a veterinary hospital when the hoarder allowed.

2.5. Procedures for data analysis

The data were organized and analyzed in a bank, created in the program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 17) for Windows. Data were described by absolute (n) and relative (%) frequencies for qualitative variables, and by average and standard deviation for quantitative variables.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Characterization of hoarders

The final sample was composed of 33 animal hoarders. The average age of the individuals in the sample was 61.39 years old (SD = 12.69)