

## REVIEWS &amp; RESEARCH REPORTS

## Normalizing passive cruelty: The excuses and justifications of animal hoarders

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### Abstract

*Press reports frequently characterize animal hoarders as bad, mad, or sad people. This descriptive study identifies the accounts hoarders use to neutralize these negative portrayals. A total of 163 articles representing 118 hoarding cases between 2000 to 20003 were content-analyzed. Findings indicate that hoarders employ a variety of justifications and excuses to explain and normalize their treatment of animals. Justifications include denying wrongdoing, being a Good Samaritan, and professing to be victims of the system, while excuses include attributing their poor performance to external events, appealing to defeasibility, scapegoating, and self-handicapping. The results point to the value of these accounts to hoarders as well as to authorities and experts who deal with and manage this behavior.*

**Keywords:** *animal hoarding, excuses, justifications, passive cruelty*

An alarming number of animal hoarding cases emerge every year in the United States. In fact, between 700 and 2,000 cases are reported annually, with 60 percent being repeat offenders (Patronek 1999). As a result, many companion animals are kept in inappropriate, inadequate, and over-crowded conditions that cause starvation, disease, behavioral problems, or death (Campbell and Robinson 2000). People who collect large numbers of animals only to neglect them present serious challenges for owners, for the animals involved, and for the community (Worth and Beck 1981).

The complex nature of hoarding cases makes them difficult to investigate and to resolve. They cross many jurisdictions including police, animal

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control, public health, building inspection, and social services; however, in order to protect people's civil rights, most laws restrict agencies from intervening unless others are being harmed. For each social control institution that weighs in on how to manage these cases, the public is given a different perspective on how to understand hoarders and their behavior. When the press reports the opinions of these various "experts," three negative images of hoarders are communicated to the public (Arluke et al. 2002).

One adverse image is that hoarders are criminals. Experts often characterize hoarding as a form of passive cruelty that can be more disturbing than isolated incidents of violent aggression. Often, the former affects many animals kept for months or even years under conditions of horrendous deprivation and suffering (Lockwood and Cassidy 1988). They fail to provide them with minimum standards of care and are oblivious to their animals' suffering. As a consequence, these animals are victims of severe emaciation, they often have serious health and behavioral problems, or they even die. In this vein, one article (Colin 2002), entitled "Loving Animals to Death," describes animal hoarders as "keeping a light foot in the serial killer camp: Like serial killers they are pathetic but obsessively thorough and are motivated by a perversion of something that could maybe almost make sense." Further on, the article contains an interview with a California resident. He stated "I think that [hoarders] believe they are loving those animals...but animal cruelty is just as bad as cruelty to children" (Colin 2002, pp. 2–3).

If not seen as criminals, then hoarders are portrayed as psychologically disturbed. Experts have suggested several psychiatric explanations, including the claim that hoarders suffer from delusions (HARC 2000), dementia (Patronek 1999), addiction (Lockwood 1994), attachment disorder, control problems (Lockwood 1994), or obsessive compulsiveness (Rasmussen and Eisen 1992; Lockwood 1994; Frost et al. 1995; Ball, Baer and Otto 1996; Winsberg, Cassic and Koran 1999; Strubbe 2000). Press reports also include the opinions of people untrained in psychology or social work who are quick to label animal hoarders as "crazy" or "far out of reality" (Arluke et al. 2002). A rabbit, rat and exotic bird hoarder living in Detroit was depicted by a humane official in this manner. He noted: "There is something mentally unstable about this particular person. I guess that responds to the reason why she is going out collecting all of these animals."

If not seen as bad or mad, hoarders are pictured as extremely pathetic or sad. Experts describe them as living in filthy conditions with a large number of animals—from dozens to over a hundred—both alive and dead. These animals—most commonly cats and dogs—are frequently ill and malnourished to the point of starvation. The floors may be covered with

feces and urine, and the air so thick that it may be difficult to breathe inside (Patronek 2001). Such households are often heavily cluttered with garbage, with unsanitary living and food preparation areas. These conditions may inhibit normal movement about the home and pose a threat to the hoarder's health and safety. In some cases, the residences are condemned as unfit for human habitation (HARC 2002). Additionally, involved animals suffer from serious health and behavioral problems that can require euthanasia (Patronek 1999).

Although hoarders can break the law, suffer from genuine mental illnesses, or live in sub-standard conditions, these individualistic, psychological views ignore the fact that hoarders function within subcultures where they learn how to counter derogatory labels and create more affirming self conceptions. To avoid negative attributions of others as well as self-recriminations, they will present themselves in a favorable light by constructing "accounts" or "techniques of neutralization" to explain or normalize the behavior in question (Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968; Snyder 1985; Sykes and Matza 2002). These constructions lessen the stigma of hoarding by either claiming that the behavior is reasonable or by denying responsibility for these "bad" acts. In other words, they either justify or excuse their acts. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), justifications accept responsibility for the act in question, but deny the pejorative quality associated with it. Alternatively, excuses admit that the act in question is wrong but deny full responsibility. Snyder, Higgins and Stucky (1983) note that accounts lessen the negative implications of an actor's performance, thereby maintaining a positive image of oneself and for others. Because justifications and excuses are a way of coping with such negative labels, they need to be taken seriously.

There also is a practical reason to study these accounts, beyond capturing the hoarders' own voice in and of itself. While it is impossible to know whether hoarders "truly believe" their accounts, they are frequently used with peers and strangers to construct a respectable self image. Detailed knowledge of how hoarders explain their behavior can help those who deal with them in a legal or mental health capacity to better anticipate and respond to their defenses. To intervene and remedy hoarding situations, animal welfare groups, veterinarians, animal control, public health and mental health agencies, child welfare and adult protective services, and housing authorities would do well to know how hoarders think about and defend their actions, instead of dismissing their talk as idle or defensive, if not an indication of delusion or mental disorder. Only then can these authorities engage in more effective dialogue with hoarders and their supporters than is now usually the case.

## Methods

To examine how hoarders manage their adverse labeling, we studied accounts they and their supporters used in the news. These reports were obtained from the Tufts University Center for Animals and Public Policy's media files. These files contain national newspaper articles gathered by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) for over four years. Most articles were found by searching animal listservs, while humane officers throughout the country supplied others. Since animal hoarding press reports are infrequent, only a convenience sample could be selected. Despite this sampling method, there are reasons to believe that the sample studied is a good representation of newspaper reports of hoarding in general.

Of course, some people do not consider these reports to be a valid source of data for research. Criticism usually points to journalists who allegedly distort the content of stories or select only certain events to report. However, studies of the accuracy of the news present a different picture. For example, Danzger (1982) and Earl et al. (2004) report that the news is fairly accurate with regard to describing and selecting events. Indeed, news stories are an ideal source to examine how people present themselves, since they are addressing a large, public audience.

A total of 163 articles from 2000 to 2003 were gathered. These articles were selected from a larger pool of 438 in Tufts' media files. Reports were selected only if they presented an account given by the hoarder or third parties to justify or explain their behavior. As some articles contained more than one case and some cases were addressed in more than one newspaper article, a total of 118 were analyzed.

The articles were coded and assigned a case number, considering each hoarder as a single case. The coding sheets included the case number, hoarder's name, newspaper, headline, and most importantly, the accounts given by the hoarders and/or by third parties. After being coded, cases were initially sorted into different categories of accounts. Depending on the hoarders and/or third parties' accounts, the cases were assigned to one of these two broad categories. Justifications included cases where responsibility is admitted but the wrongfulness of the behavior is denied. Hoarders in these cases often engage in a "it's not so bad" type of explanation. Excuses included cases where the wrongfulness of the behavior is admitted but responsibility is denied. Hoarders in these cases often engage in a "yes, but..." type of explanation. After sorting cases into the above broad categories, we conducted a more thorough classification. Different types of accounts were distinguished within each of the original categories.

## Results

In the face of pejorative portrayals in the press, hoarders construct a more positive image of themselves. As seen in Table 1, they create a variety of justifications and excuses to normalize their behavior.

**Table 1.** Typology of justifications and excuses.

<b>Types and subtypes of justifications and excuses for animal hoarding</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
Justifications	51 (44.0)*
Total Denial	17 (33.3)†
Simple Denial	1 (5.9)‡
Denial + further explanation	10 (58.8)‡
Profound love for animals	6 (35.3)‡
Good samaritan	19 (37.3)†
Animal rescuers	13 (68.4)‡
Saving animals from death	6 (31.6)‡
Victims of the System	15 (29.4)†
Excuses	65 (56.0)*
Difficulty of the task	16 (24.6)†
Defeasibility	6 (9.2)†
Scapegoating	10 (15.4)†
Lack of intentionality	4 (6.2)†
Self-handicapping	9 (13.8)†
Appealing to accidents	20 (30.8)

\*percent of all cases; †percent of category; ‡percent of type

## Justifications

Justifications are socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question (Snyder 1985). They do this by having the individual accept responsibility for the act in question, but deny it is bad or claim that it is not “that bad” (Snyder, Higgins and Stucky 1983). Our analysis revealed that many hoarders reframed their performance in this way by using different types of justifications.

Hoarders justified themselves in 51 of the 116 cases we analyzed. As seen in Table 1, there were three types of justifications, including total denial, Good Samaritan, and victims of the system. We found 17 cases of denial (33.3%),

including simple denial (one case), denial with further explanation (ten cases) and claiming to love their animals as children (six cases). The Good Samaritan type had a total of 19 cases (37.3%), including hoarders who believed to be animal rescuers (13 cases) and those who claimed to have saved them from death (six cases). The victim of the system type had 15 cases (29.4%).

### **Denial**

Denial is the simplest type of justification. By completely rejecting any incrimination, subjects deny that their actions are immoral, strange, or untoward. As reported in the news, hoarders use this technique in a variety of ways. At times hoarders deny all accusations without further explanation, while at other times they contend that animals are well cared for, that they have profound love for them as though they were own children, or that their animals are happy and love them back.

Simple denial without elaboration by hoarders was rare. For instance, in a case in which 50 dogs were found in horrendous conditions, an intervening shelter worker said about the owner, "She believes that these dogs are in great shape, and we've got 12 medical people upstairs working on each and every one for two hours because they're in horrible shape."<sup>1</sup> In another case, when 50 neglected animals were found in a filthy home, an animal control official stated that the owner truly believed she had done nothing wrong.

It was more common to find complete denial followed by a short explanation to support their point. In this manner, a man denied that it was filthy to live with 27 dogs and 47 cats in a loft covered in animal waste. He claimed it was cleaned "every day, sometimes twice a day." When challenged by the reporter who asserted he could smell the filth, he answered "Well, do you know what dogs and cats do? They mark their territory." In this case, the hoarder not only denies doing anything wrong, but also provides more explanation to support his statement.

Other hoarders described the benefits enjoyed by their animals. In a case where 38 dogs were found living in a single room, the owner of the animals said, "They got a room of their own. We got two windows in there, they get air and sunshine. They won't come outside because they are scared." Furthermore, the animal control officer intervening in the case described the owner as "...a very sweet woman," and stated: "I have no doubt she absolutely loved her dogs. This is the most difficult kind of case." In another case, where 37 starving dogs were found living in a home filled with disease, the owner stated that they all were well cared for. "This is heaven for them," he said. "They're playing ball...love it...and they don't have mange and they love it here. Did you see that dog there wag its tail?" he said, pointing at a dog.

“That dog wants to play ball. It’s the elephant man thing. Looks are deceiving. That’s not what you judge suffering by.” In both cases, hoarders supported their denial by providing details of the excellent care given to their animals. By asserting that the animals were happy and healthy, hoarders painted a picture of their animals’ love for them. This assertion suggests that hoarders consider their animals’ love as evidence that they received appropriate care.

Many hoarders claimed to love their animals as their children and stated that “they all had names,” as evidence of proper care towards them. Thus, to justify their behavior, hoarders identify animals as family members and profess to love them. For instance, one hoarder claimed: “My dogs are my children, to be quite honest. They are the things that give me the most joy.” The hoarder was described by his roommate and business partner, saying: “He is very conscientious in his day to day care for animals. He is in love with the dogs. He knows every name, he knows their birth dates.” The humane society intervening in the case claimed that the 44 dogs discovered in the house lived in horrendous conditions. In another case, where 100 animals, including a 11 cats, rats, guinea pigs, a baboon, a potbellied pig, an iguana, a tarantula, and a skunk were seized from a filthy home, a neighbor of the hoarder described the woman by saying: “She truly loved her animals. She has names for each and every one of them.”

In some cases, denial is more implicit but still evident. For instance, in a Florida case where 57 hairless terriers were found living in a filthy home, the article claimed he “doesn’t understand why all the protestors want to take his dogs away.” The hoarder said, “Why these people are here to take my dogs I have no idea. I was caught in a hoax. They said I was going to euthanize all the dogs.” By stating that he has no clue why his dogs are being taken from him, the hoarder implicitly denies wrongdoing.

### **Good Samaritan**

The Good Samaritan strategy embeds a bad act in another context. Snyder (1985) calls this process “exonerative moral reasoning.” By considering an ill deed as a necessary part of a larger virtuous act, the wrongfulness of the performance is diluted by the honorable purpose.

Many hoarders employ this type of justification. In other words, they lessen the negativity of their performance by grounding the act in something noble. By claiming to be animal rescuers, shelters, or saviors, they frame what others might see as gross neglect as a kind-hearted, benevolent act to care for animals that no one else will help or save. For instance, in a Pennsylvania case in which 18 emaciated dogs were seized from a home, the hoarder explained to authorities that she was starting her own humane soci-

ety. Similarly, a hoarder of more than 24 dogs told reporters that she rescues the dogs and gives them shots. She explained: "They were so skinny when I got them out of the Warwick pound, that the three kennels that I had them boarded with, said they [the dogs] were totally emaciated. They put weight back on and have their shots and they're eating." In another case, when 39 cats were discovered living in horrible conditions, the hoarder said she was trying to establish a no-kill shelter. She claimed: "I am not a hoarder, people said I was a hoarder because I refused to associate with shelters that euthanize." Finally, a hoarder of 12 pit bulls told reporters he took the animals after the original owners did not want them. He claimed that he saved them and tried to find homes for them. This type of account attempts to elevate the act by claiming some altruistic motive. By employing this tactic, hoarders claim their behavior is reasonable or, in some cases, even morally admirable.

Although some hoarders do not claim to be rescuers or no-kill shelters, they claim to be doing a good thing for the animals, thereby refuting the charge of animal neglect by defining their behavior as a virtue. Within this category, saving animals from death seems to be a recurrent theme used by hoarders to justify their behavior. The frequency of this type of claim suggests that hoarders consider potential death to be a strong argument in favor of keeping animals in horrid conditions. For instance, a man who was found living with 60 dogs and two cats claimed that nine dogs were his, while the remainder belonged to people who had asked him to care for them. "It was a goodwill gesture. I want those animals to live. I'd rather be put to sleep myself," he said, choking into tears. Another hoarder of 31 cats said he refused to take the felines to a shelter because he did not want to see them euthanized. "I love animals and I don't feel any animal should be put to death," he said, citing religious reasons. The owner of 64 pit bulls and a Rottweiler claimed: "That was my family. I took care of dogs people were trying to kill." These claims reveal that hoarders consider death to be an unthinkable option, believing that any other possibility, no matter how horrific, is better for the animals.

### **Victims of the System**

A popular method to lessen the negativity of adverse labeling is to discredit the source of criticism. The individual shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his actions. Thus, by changing the subject of the conversation from the bad performance to the reactions of others, the wrongfulness of the behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view (Sykes and Matza 2002).

Many hoarders used this type of justification. The most common way was to claim that officials and/or animal groups intervening in cases had per-

sonal vendettas against them. In other words, they believed that the whole “system” was against them. In a case where more than 150 dogs, 14 cats, three monkeys and a pregnant pot-bellied pig were discovered living in squalid conditions, the hoarder denied that the animals were improperly cared for and charged that the local humane society and police were harassing her family without reason. She claimed the police bruised her wrist and breasts and treated her elderly mother with no respect. “For 12 hours I sat in jail, treated like a criminal,” she said. In addition, a hoarder of 33 dogs complained: “I’m sick and tired of this harangue. For doing something good I am getting nailed and being treated as a common criminal.” Some of his acquaintances expressed similar sentiment. In fact, an anonymous donor posted the hoarder’s bail from jail and expressed that “he loves animals and thinks what [the hoarder] does is wonderful. He feels he’s been a victim of the system.”

Hoarders also used the victim justification when they claimed to be the target of a conspiracy against them, perhaps even demanding compensation for damages suffered. For instance, in a case in which almost 200 emaciated dogs were confiscated from a Georgia home, the hoarder alleged the real reason for the seizure of her dogs was “bad blood” between the officer in charge of the county’s animal services and her. The hoarder also accused officers of damaging her pens and costing her money because she had no other source of income than selling the seized dogs. In another case, after winning “conditional” approval to have two of her dogs back, the hoarder of 19 seized dogs said, “They [animal control officers] want to come up once a month and tell me how to feed my dogs. I’m a United States citizen. They’re treating me like a criminal. Don’t you think that’s horrible? I can’t understand why the county is always after me.” Additionally, in a case in which 465 neglected felines were found living in a six-room “no-kill shelter,” the “rescue director” thought the investigation was a personal vendetta against her. “She [referring to the animal cruelty investigator] is challenging and attacking my shelter. We are not hoarders, we do adopt our cats out,” she argued. And in a case where 53 diseased and neglected dogs were seized after being found kept in cages, the owner argued: “They had no right to take my dogs. It was a total setup. They just made up this thing, it’s not true. They stole my property. They took my dogs away from their home. They are liars and thieves as far as I am concerned.” In such instances, hoarders deny accusations against them and attribute the problem to personal spite against them.

### **Excuses**

Excuses accept the negativity of a performance, but deny or deflect full responsibility for the act (Scott and Lyman 1968; Alonso 1985). Claiming

lack of responsibility for “bad” actions sharply reduces the effectiveness of disapproval (Sykes and Matza 1957). This lack of responsibility is typically attributed to extenuating circumstances relevant to the bad performance. The excuse-maker admits the negative connotation of the performance, but continues with a series of “yes, but...” verbalizations to deflect responsibility (Snyder 1985).

Hoarders excused themselves in 65 of the 116 cases we analyzed. As seen in Table 1, there were six types of excuses, including appealing to the difficulty of the task, defeasibility (not being fully informed or lacking free will), scapegoating, lack of intentionality, self-handicapping and appealing to accidents. We found that 16 cases appealed to the difficulty of the task (24.6%), six cases appealed to defeasibility (9.2%), ten cases used the scapegoating type of excuse (15.4%), four cases appealed to lack of intention (6.1%), nine cases used the self-handicapping technique (13.8%) and 20 cases appealed to accidents (30.8%).

#### **Difficulty of the Task**

If the task is sufficiently challenging, the excuse-maker reasons and expects others to reason as well that anyone would do poorly on it. By demonstrating that most people would do the same thing in his situation, the individual’s responsibility is lessened. Hoarders using this excuse recognize that it is unacceptable to own so many animals and that, as a result, they have neglected them, but claim that others would have behaved similarly because of the difficulty of the task.

More specifically, many hoarders claimed that they became “overwhelmed” or that the number of animals “proved too much for them.” News reports often mentioned how many animals hoarders initially owned, as well as their good intentions and kindness towards them. The reports also may contain an explanation from the hoarder, a friend, or relative about how the collection “started snowballing” or “got out of hand.” For instance, in a case in which 27 cats were discovered in a squalid trailer, the hoarder explained that he started by rescuing three kittens and that they started breeding. After claiming he was not a hoarder, and that he only wanted to find the cats good homes, he noted: “It [the situation] just got a little out of hand. I’m just a good person whose heart was bigger than my abilities.” In another case, where a woman was discovered living with 96 cats, nine dogs, six mice, a turtle, and a rat in filthy conditions, a neighbor commented that the hoarder seemed to be trying to do the right thing, but the situation got out of hand. “It is a shame. She was trying to make an effort. I think she wanted to do the right thing and maybe got overwhelmed.” In addition, an article covering the case of a couple who

hoarded 96 dogs and cats in a three-bedroom home reported that the hoarders provided a loving home for the animals, but that things had gotten “out of control” after breeding the dogs over a number of years. The woman explained that because they could not afford to spay or neuter them, their dogs began to multiply. She also said that friends gave them more dogs.

In some cases, hoarders claimed that they became overwhelmed without providing details about how and when the situation got out of control. For example, in a case in which 24 live animals and five dead cats were found in a soiled home, the hoarder stated that he tried to take care of the animals, but their upkeep proved too much for him. Additionally, in a case where the police removed 105 cats and 22 dogs, neighbors maintained that the hoarder was a “kind person who just got overwhelmed.” Moreover, a hoarder of 72 sick cats that were confined in a small barn was defended by her attorney by stating, “It was just too much with 72 cats for her to be in a strict time schedule, but she didn’t do intentional acts based on the animal cruelty statute.”

This type of excuse implies that hoarders who employ it are “sane” because they acknowledge that they have too many animals and that they are poorly kept. By claiming that they became overextended, hoarders recognize the inappropriateness of their behavior. This insight into the rationality of their behavior does not seem to be present in hoarders that utilize other types of accounts, especially those who totally deny wrongdoing, those who claim to be victims of the system, and those who employ some of the strategies described below.

### **Defeasibility**

Another defense is to claim that one is not fully informed or that one’s “will” is not completely “free.” Thus, an individual might excuse himself from responsibility by claiming that certain information, which would have altered his behavior, is not available, or that available information misrepresents the facts. Alternatively, an individual might excuse himself by claiming interference with his “free will,” due to duress or undue influence. Finally, both will and knowledge can be impaired under certain conditions that constitute a mitigation of responsibility, such as intoxication or temporary insanity (Scott and Lyman 1968). Hoarders lessen their responsibility by using this kind of excuse.

One way they do this is to invoke some restraint on their free will, although only a few cases did this. A hoarder of 90 cats, explained, “I got so close to my baby cats that I couldn’t give any of them away.” Another hoarder explained that he ended up having 88 dogs because spaying and neutering them “didn’t work out” and because after the puppies were born “it was

impossible to give them away.” He added, “They are not just animals, they have a soul.” In another case, where 68 cats and dogs were discovered living in squalid conditions, the officers involved in the case said that the hoarder appeared to be someone who loved animals and could not turn away a stray. Additionally, a hoarder of 200 cats was excused by a local humane society representative and by the sheriff, who stated: “These things escalate over a period of time. Hoarders like [the hoarder in this case] are not trying to abuse the animals. Hoarders just keep collecting and can’t seem to get rid of the cats and kittens.” These examples suggest that hoarders’ actions are driven by a mysterious force, often referred to by them or by the media as “extreme love.” Thus, these hoarders recognize that what they have done is wrong, but they claim not to be fully responsible because their love for the animals obscured their free will.

Less frequently, hoarders make an appeal to defeasibility by citing a lack of knowledge. In one case, a woman found living in filth with sixteen non-vaccinated dogs alleged that she did not know that she needed a license to have that many animals in her house. She said that her dogs had no vaccinations because they were indoor dogs and that county officials told her she only needed to have three of her dogs vaccinated for rabies. In another case, in which over 100 emaciated and 50 dead cats were found in a home, the hoarder was described by animal advocates as a woman who often did not know when to draw the line when taking stray animals. An old friend said: “I know how much she loved animals. She is an animal lover through and through.”

### **Scapegoating**

Scapegoating is a discrediting strategy by which people shift blame and responsibility away from themselves to a target person or group. By scapegoating, hoarders allege that their questioned behavior is a response to the behavior or attitudes of another (Scott and Lyman 1968). They do this by blaming people that bring unsolicited animals to them, people that lose or abandon their pets, and the community in general for not helping homeless animals.

In this sense a hoarder, whose 18 animals were captured after being found living in filth, explained that many cats had been left at her place by acquaintances when they could not breed them. “What can I do when just born babies are left at your doors?” Moreover, a rabbit hoarder said she began with one animal and over the years wild rabbits began visiting through the fence. She added that unwanted pets started showing up in her yard, as well, especially after Easter. Additionally, in a case where 63 live and 30 dead cats were found in a “shelter,” a volunteer expressed: “There was no ill treatment of animals there [at the shelter]. Those animals were loved. They

were fed and watered every day, not thrown out like the people who are the reason why they are there do.” Furthermore, a hoarder of 32 cats and two dogs explained: “If only other people would take care of them [cats], I wouldn’t have to.” She added: “I felt I was doing the city a favor. Those were 32 cats who weren’t getting pregnant and spreading disease in our area.” Finally, a hoarder of about 90 dogs claimed to be doing the county a favor by taking in dogs because there was no animal control facility in the area.

Excuse-makers also engage in more concrete blaming tactics by pointing to a precise subject whom they consider responsible for the bad performance, instead of making a global accusation. Only two hoarders claimed that another person was actually responsible for the animals. For instance, the lawyer of a hoarder of 39 sick cats explained that the animals were not hers, but her sister’s, therefore claiming that the hoarder should not be held responsible for the neglect.

### **Lack of Intentionality**

Research suggests that intended actions, if they have negative outcomes, are perceived as being worse than unintended actions (Rotenberg 1980). Similarly, people are held as being more accountable for negative actions that are foreseeable as compared to those actions that are unforeseeable (Shaw 1968). Hoarders also used this excuse to lessen their responsibility for charges of animal neglect by claiming there was no intention to do so.

Typically, hoarders claimed they did not mean to harm animals, but were just trying to help them. One hoarder of exotic animals, who was living with crocodiles, turkeys, wolves, spiders, reptiles, a miniature horse, a lynx, a mountain lion, and an emu, and was surrounded by filthy bags of fecal matter, carcasses and cockroaches, said he was a well-intentioned man with a broken dream. “I have nothing left,” he said after his animals were seized. “I made some mistakes but I did what I thought was right at the time,” he added. The hoarder claimed he was months away from opening his own living museum. In another case, 34 dead and sick cats were found in a home including seven kittens in the freezer. A friend of the cat hoarder remarked: “She taught me a lot about cat breeding, she loved those cats. I don’t think she was intentionally cruel to those cats.”

Although only a few cases explicitly claim a lack of intention, the vast majority appear to excuse their behavior in the same manner, even if they do not say “I didn’t mean it.” Behind every other account hoarders use to defend their behavior, there is always the implicit assumption that they did not mean to harm the animals. Every type of excuse, as well as the Good Samaritan justification, contains the assumption that their behavior or its results were

not intentional. In this sense, intentionality may be defined as a determination to act in a certain way with full consciousness of the nature of one's act and its consequences. Thus, every type of excuse used by hoarders contains the supposition that they were not determined to harm the animals, and that they were not fully aware of the consequences of their acts; instead, hoarders were trying to care for the animals. Similarly, the core idea of the Good Samaritan justification is that the hoarder is an animal rescuer; thus, the lack of intentionality to harm the animals is implicit in this type of account.

### **Self-handicapping**

Another excuse used by individuals to lessen responsibility for a poor performance is "self-handicapping." According to Jones and Berglas (1978, p. 406), self-handicapping is "any action or choice of performance setting that enhances the opportunities to externalize (or excuse) failure and to internalize (reasonably accept credit for) success." In other words, their own limited abilities make them not fully responsible for their bad actions; if they were free of disabilities, they would have performed better.

Some hoarders employ this type of excuse. One way was to cite physical or mental problems that caused poor treatment and accumulation of animals. For instance, in a case in which two hoarders (mother and daughter) were found living with 80 dogs, 65 chickens and ducks, and 14 rabbits in a trailer, the daughter explained she had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), "but it is not as bad as hers," she claimed, referring to her mother. She also told reporters that she takes medication for her OCD, depression, and fear of people. In another case, a hoarder of 36 horses, 32 dogs and ten donkeys was defended by her attorney who claimed: "My client is mentally ill. She is a homeless person, she was mentally ill at the time this took place." In another case, a horse hoarder was excused by his brother when the latter explained that his sibling suffered from lupus and back problems that made it difficult for him to care for the horses. Similarly, a dog hoarder charged with animal cruelty after 30 dogs were found starving or dead at her home, told investigators that she had been ill and did not have enough time to properly care for the animals.

Other self-handicaps include economic deprivation to excuse behavior, claiming that lack of money prevents them from properly caring for so many animals. In this way, a hoarder of 164 dogs claimed to be a dog breeder and to sell the dogs to supplement her low, monthly disability income. She explained that she had been unable to sell many dogs over the past year because of poor health and the high cost of ads, although she maintained that she still took good care of the dogs. In a case in which 53 dogs and nine cats

were discovered living in a broken down, feces-ridden home, the owner said she received disability payments and used most of them to clean and feed the pets. She explained that unsanitary conditions in her home came about over several years. "With what little bit I live on, of course, I take care of my babies first. And then I do what ever else I can with the help of the church." A friend of the hoarder defended her as well. "The only thing that lady is guilty of is just loving animals," he said. "It just got out of hand because she had breast cancer." He also claimed to often help the hoarder with repairs on her home, but his own personal problems had kept him away for the past three months.

### **Appealing to Accidents**

Another way to excuse a poor performance is to attribute it to external unforeseeable circumstances. This kind of account lessens the responsibility of the excuse-maker by attributing blame to an unpredictable event that causes horrendous conditions. Hoarders often claim to be victims of circumstances that cause their animals' poor conditions. By diverting attention from the bad performance, they lessen or even eliminate responsibility for their action. The alleged accidents include personal jams, unanticipated logistic or administrative problems, weather conditions, or any other unforeseeable event.

For one, some hoarders point to problems with spouses or partners to excuse their behavior. For instance, a cat hoarder claimed that he had 39 in his room because his girlfriend left him a couple of weeks before, and he had been unable to continue caring for the cats. He said, "I love the cats. I adore them. I've been with them their whole lives. I can trace them back to four females." Moreover, in a case in which 400 dead or malnourished cats were discovered in an abandoned home, the hoarder explained he had tried his best to care for the cats after his wife died. "I felt she was more important than those animals, but I did go there and did feed them," he noted.

Other hoarders mentioned they had an ambiguous "problem" without engaging in specific details about how it lead to the neglect of animals. For instance, a cat hoarder discovered living with 67 dead cats and dozens of other neglected felines told authorities she had personal problems that kept her from attending to the animals. In another case, a woman charged with 26 counts of animal cruelty for neglecting her horses, dogs, cats, and birds maintained she had never abused her animals and that her horses were naturally skinny. She acknowledged that some of the cages were dirty and attributed this to some "problems" she was going through.

Other "accidents" often alleged by hoarders, such as logistic and administrative problems or other unexpected events, are illustrated by the following cases. In one instance, when more than two dozen hungry and thirsty

dogs were discovered alone in a home, the owner explained she had not intended to be gone for five days, but was in jail for a traffic conviction. In another case, a ferret hoarder who was discovered living in filth with 235 ferrets insisted that the animals became ill in transport and that they were all healthy in her care. A similar case involved 171 dogs in a trailer going from Alaska to Montana. The hoarder blamed an overnight delay at the border for the dogs' grim shape. Additionally, a hoarder of 24 exotic birds, 20 dogs and 6 cats, who had his animals seized due to their poor condition, explained he had problems with the heat and water but the animals were well cared for. Even more, in a case in which a kennel operator was charged with neglect of her dogs (after 4 wounded pit bulls were found surrounded by excrement in a garage with no light or ventilation), her lawyer explained that the dogs created the "mess" while the owner was sleeping or away from the house.

A few cases fail to mention special circumstances and only focus on how the excuse-maker has done better. Mentioning good performances implies the existence of an accident; reference to those situations in which the subject has acted properly sets a favorable precedent. A poor performance is more likely to be regarded as an accident because it is considered to be atypical behavior, given that the subject is known to otherwise perform well. The cases analyzed here indicate that this is done more often by third parties than by hoarders. For instance, in a case where 19 dead Golden Retrievers and 11 other severely malnourished dogs were found in a home, a friend and former client described the hoarder as a well known and respected dog breeder and trainer. "It floors me what happened," she said. Additionally, in a case in which 50 dogs were found in a hidden puppy mill at the back of a pet grooming store, a former client expressed her surprise by stating, "They did such a good job and took care of them [animals], but when we were called now [and announced the discovery], we stood there and said, What?!!" A neighbor also mentioned, "The first time I came walking out here, he [hoarder] walked over and introduced himself and he seemed like a great guy."

By using this tactic, hoarders suggest that unlike their poor performance in one situation, there are other places where they have performed well. Thus, the "questioned" subjects imply they should be held less responsible for a single bad performance in this particular situation. They seem to think they have earned some sort of "credit" for their good behavior in other areas of their life, and that this allows them to perform poorly in other situations without being held fully responsible for their behavior.

Another example is the case of a dog hoarder who was discovered living with 100 emaciated dogs. Although the hoarder was not interviewed, many friends and relatives spoke about him. They employed more than one

type of excuse in doing this. In fact, a police officer who knew the hoarder stated: "I don't think he intentionally hurt a single one [of the dogs]." Other animal rescuers asserted: "We think he was simply overwhelmed. One man can't take care of 100 dogs." The intentionality argument suggests that the bad performance was very unusual for the hoarder. If the hoarder had acted intentionally, then he certainly would not have behaved this way. The "overextended" argument was also used by suggesting that others would behave in a similar fashion under the same difficult circumstances.

## Discussion

As reported in the news, hoarders and those speaking on their behalf resort to various accounts or neutralizing techniques to construct or maintain positive self-images. Some used justifications to explain their performances, including denial, being a Good Samaritan, and professing to be victims of the system, while more used excuses, including attributing their poor performances to external events, appealing to defeasibility, scapegoating, and self-handicapping. The majority of hoarders tend to stick with a strategy of using a single type of justification or excuse. In fact, we found only two cases in which hoarders mixed types of excuses, and no cases when they mixed types of justifications. Moreover, we found only two cases that combined both excuses and justifications in the same account. Only rarely did hoarders appeal to a "laundry list" of excuses, or both excuses and justifications, to explain their behavior.

It is not surprising that hoarders more often excused rather than justified their behavior. Since these cases are so grotesque and animal emaciation is so evident, hoarders may consider it easier to accept the wrongfulness of the behavior and deny responsibility for it, than to deny the wrongfulness of the behavior and accept responsibility for it. Also, by making accounts more credible, hoarders enhance their effectiveness as tools to create respectability.

It is also not surprising that a few hoarders used multiple excuses, or combined excuses with justifications, as they apparently tried to shore up their accounts. To illustrate the use of multiple excuses, take the above-mentioned case of the woman claiming to suffer from OCD. When approximately 160 animals were found living in her trailer, she claimed to have an obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and fear of people. She also mentioned her mother would not let her get rid of some of the animals. In this case, she uses self-handicapping to excuse her behavior and a coercion-based tactic ("her mother wouldn't let her get rid of some animals"). The former suggests that the bad performance in the given situation is very unusual for the hoarder. Because her disorder seems to be what makes the hoarder act

this way, it is implied that she would have behaved differently if she were not ill. On the other hand, the coercion-based tactic employed seeks to demonstrate that people would have proceeded similarly in the same situation. To illustrate the use of both excuses and justifications in the same account, note the case of 24 live and four dead St. Bernards that were found in a home: The hoarder said she ran a St. Bernard rescue operation and had not gotten around to burying the dead dogs because she suffered from depression. Firstly, the hoarder attempts to shed some positive light on her performance by claiming to be an animal rescuer. Secondly, she uses the self-handicapping type of excuse by asserting she suffers from depression, attempting to lessen her responsibility for the performance in question. It appears here that the hoarder recognizes the wrongfulness of the act, while acknowledging her responsibility for it. Therefore, she needs to engage in both tactics to manage the stigma of being seen as cruel.

Shoring up their accounts suggests the potential protective benefits of neutralizing techniques. Hoarders' esteem would be threatened if they accepted the opinions of experts and others critical of their neglect of animals, home, family, and self. Because animals and their care are an important identity-creating device for hoarders, seeing themselves as a failure in this regard would likely be devastating. In this sense, justifications and excuses are necessary illusions (Snyder and Higgins 1988) that shield or prop up their sense of self by helping them soften the blow of any critical voice or audience. That hoarders draw upon multiple excuses and justifications, then, may give them such added protection.

Psychological benefits are not the only protective consequences of justifying and excusing hoarding. Hoarders also can benefit from neutralizing techniques in another way; if used successfully, there are secondary health benefits. At the same time that hoarder's behavior is very unhealthy for animals, their accounts may be physically healthy for them to create and use. Orbuch et al. (1994), for example, note that failure to engage in account-making can lead to chronic problems, including psychosomatic illness. While certainly not an argument to encourage or allow hoarding to continue, if true, understanding such secondary gains provides insight into the many consequences that accounts have for those who create them.

Of course, future research must assess the impact and effectiveness of these neutralization techniques, since determining this is beyond the scope of the present article. Do hoarders genuinely believe their accounts and do these accounts buttress their self esteem and health? It also is important to assess the effectiveness of these accounts among hoarders' external audiences. Jordan (1989) maintains that even skeptical listeners are normally

reluctant to challenge or deny directly what an excuse-maker says. Snyder and Higgins (1988) concur, noting that the audience “collaborates” with an excuse-maker to keep his self-esteem intact. In this respect, to what extent, if at all, do others support hoarders’ accounts?

Finally, some readers might find it unsavory to focus on the effectiveness of these accounts. It is important to recognize that they are harmless if this were their only consequence. Unfortunately for hoarders, their accounts stand in the way of future “recovery” by allowing them to overlook what is often extreme neglect of animals, people, and property. By justifying or excusing their behaviors whenever challenged, hoarders continue to avoid the problems they create. However, authorities and experts who seek to manage these problems would do well to understand hoarders’ logic and thinking. By doing so, they can enhance their dialogue with hoarders and develop more sensitive treatments for them.

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## Notes

1. In the interests of privacy, the authors have not provided citations for quotations relating to specific hoarders.

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