Violence against humans and violence against animals: analogies and differences

In the last few decades the studies that have been carried out on the phenomenon of human violence have more and more frequently considered human violence against animals within the same theoretical framework. This new broad perspective has been particularly beneficial for several reasons, among which a new and stronger attempt to better identify and analyse the motivations of violence, a renewed and enlarged debate on the concept of violence, and a new stimulus to consider also those affective and cognitive processes that can be defined as opposed to violence, such as empathy, love, and compassion, within a comprehensive perspective, which includes both humans and animals. Suffice it to mention a special issue, published in 2009, of the *Journal of Social Issues*, entirely dedicated to human-animal interactions, an issue of the *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* dedicated to violence and published in 2006 with a paper by Rowan on animal abuse, and the handbook *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), edited by Scott Plous, which contains an Appendix entitled “Animal as an outgroup”. Finally, in the international conference I am organizing “The Seville Statement on Violence: twenty-five years later” (Rome, 22-25 September 2011, www.istc.cnr.it/cica), both Frank R. Ascione and I will address the issue of human violence against animals.

Concepts like power, competition and relationship with diversity are now being used in the analysis of human violence both against humans and animals. Other concepts that have for a long time been traditionally used in social psychology, like ingroup/outgroup, contact, prejudice, and social dominance orientation, as far as interhuman relations are concerned, have now begun to be used also in the study of human-animal relations.

The conflicted, arbitrary, and inconsistent aspects of humans’ relationships with animals have been underlined, but scholars have also indicated that in the various cultures also the conceptions of interhuman relations are conflicted, arbitrary, and inconsistent.

Thus, the analogies between violence against humans and violence against animals are not only numerous, but are actually inherent in the concept of violence itself, considered as an abuse perpetrated on the weaker.

The only difference between the two kinds of violence probably relates to the fact that humans are, in proportion, more cruel towards animals than towards their conspecifics, since humans are more capable to defend themselves.

The effects of educational interventions aiming to countervail violence against animals are much broader, since, at least in their essential aspects, they can also improve interpersonal relations as well as humans’ relationships with the rest of the planet.

Indeed, from a psychological point of view the logical structure of that complex process which is constituted by the understanding of others is always the same, whether we refer to the understanding between men and women, the old and the young, the poor and the rich, the Inuits and Khoikhoi or between humans and animals (Robustelli, 2002).