

# The role of excuses in animal hoarding

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One of the most exasperating parts of the experience working with an animal hoarder is the wide range of excuses that are offered for the behavior and the substandard condition of the animals and environment. The above referenced article provides an interesting perspective on the normal and adaptive role excuses play in our daily lives. The synopsis below has been adapted from an article by CR Snyder, "The Excuse: an amazing grace?" In: *The self and social life*. Barry Schlenker, ed., McGraw-Hill, New York 1985 to provide additional insight into the endless array of excuses that will be forthcoming in an animal hoarding situation.

The underlying assumption of the article is that excuses are driven by a person's attempts to maintain a positive self-image and self-esteem. Self-images are developed for both internal and external audiences. External audiences are those people who may be in a position to evaluate a person's actions. Maintaining a positive image is important, and perhaps even essential, to enable a person to continue certain types of behaviors and avoid certain consequences. The internal audience reflects the person's own standards and values. Either external or internal audiences may predominate at any given time.

**Bad performance and threatened self-image**—A negative performance represents any action that does not meet the standard set by the person and society. A threatened self-image occurs when a person appears to be responsible for a negative performance. Snyder identifies four factors that pertain to the negativity of a performance.

**Clarity of standard**—As the standards for a particular activity become increasingly clear, the negative repercussions of failure to meet that standard also increase. Minimum standards for caring for common domestic pets (dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, etc) are not ambiguous. Most people would accept that fresh water, adequate food, fresh air, exercise, and a sanitary environment are obvious and basic needs. These are needs that, by definition, are not met in a hoarding situation.

**Importance of activity**—Activities that pertain to important identity dimensions for a person will tend to generate more negative repercussions if they are not successful. Animal care or rescue is often central to a hoarder's identity, therefore failure in this area could have severe repercussions for the person.

**Intentionality**—If a person intends to act in a negative fashion deliberately, the behavior will be judged more severely than if intention

was not present. Hoarders rarely if even admit to intentionally harming an animal or intentionally failing to provide proper care, and rarely acknowledge their own intentional actions and decisions that may have contributed to the situation. This includes their conscious acquisition, sometimes with great effort and subterfuge, to acquire even more animals as the situation around them deteriorates.

**Power of the critic**—The intensity of the threat of feedback from an external source may be related to the expertise, status, and general power or perceived power of the critic. The hoarder may feel particularly threatened by animal control officers or family members who may have the power to enter the home or exert some other type of control over the hoarder.

**Responsibility for a bad performance**—A threatened self-image depends on both a negative performance and a sense of responsibility for that performance. Snyder indicates that three kinds of information (consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness) help to determine if a particular bad behavior should be attributed to the person or to situational factors outside of the person.

**Consensus**—This reflects the extent to which other people have behaved similarly in the same situation. A person is held more responsible for their behavior when others have not behaved that way under similar circumstances.

**Consistency**—Consistency represents the extent to which a person has acted in the same situation over time. A person is held to greater responsibility when they repeatedly act in the same manner.

**Distinctiveness**—Distinctiveness taps the degree to which a person acts distinctively in one situation relative to another situation. A person is held more responsible when his or her behavior is the same regardless of the situation.

Low-consensus, high consistency and low distinctiveness in behaviors may all contribute to a heightened sense of personal responsibility for a bad performance, rather than external factors. The greater the negativity of the performance and responsibility, the greater will be the threat to a person's self-image and the more exaggerated the effort to protect themselves.

**Role of excuses**—Excuses are utilized to deal with this threat to self-image. Excuses are defined as explanations or actions that serve to lessen the negative implications of a person's performance., thereby maintaining a positive self image for the person and others. A common thread to all of these excuse strategies has been termed "**DIRTEing**" by Snyder. The acronym, however coincidental, is ironically all too appropriate for hoarding situations. This

**D**irecting of **I**nternal **R**esponsibilities To **E**xternal sources involves various attempts to move the responsibility from the person to outside factors. He has outlined a variety of different methods by which this is done.

**Lessening apparent responsibility**—these types of excuses attempt to cut the link between the person and the bad performance in some way. These take the form of proclaiming innocence or blaming someone or someone or something else. Hoarders frequently deny that they have done anything wrong or improper.

**Reframing the bad performance**—these excuses share the common theme of diminishing the negativity of the performance.

- “See no evil excuses” such as “Its really not so bad”, “I didn’t notice the animals were sick”, “It just happened yesterday”
- Attempts to manipulate the standards so that the observed behavior does not seem to fall so far from the mark. One way to do this is to question the clarity of the standards, or to claim that there is no way to judge the situation. If standards cannot be attacked for lack of clarity or cannot be lowered, another strategy is to try to change them.
- Another strategy is to embed the bad act into another, more virtuous one. In hoarding situations, this frequently involves claiming that they were caring for animals no one else would help or trying to save the animals from death.
- A final method of reframing is discrediting sources of negative feedback. This can be done by alleging that any evaluative instrument was too picky, or to try to discredit the individual or agency doing the evaluation. Hoarders frequently claim that humane societies, other officials, and even family members have vendettas against them.

**Lessening the transformed responsibility**—the central notion here is that there are extenuating circumstances relevant to the bad performance. The person admits the poor performance to one degree or another, but then launches into a series of “yes, but.....” excuses.

- **Consensus raising**—The person may try to demonstrate that others would behave in a similar fashion under the same circumstances. One tactic is to appeal to the difficulty of the task or luck as the factors that determined the outcome. Hoarders frequently mention the challenge and difficulty of caring for many animals on limited resources and with little or no help. They will often assert they are doing the best they can. Coercion-based tactics (eg, that someone else made them do it) are another

variant. In hoarding situations, this often manifests itself as people bringing unsolicited animals to them, or blaming the people who lose or give up their pets. Projection-based tactics (eg, that everyone else was doing it) might be expressed as anyone in a similar situation would do no better.

- **Consistency lowering**—The core idea here is that the bad performance in a given situation is very unusual. The excuse maker contends that he or she should not be held totally responsible for this one bad performance. One way to lower consistency is to claim lack of intentionality (eg, they did not mean to harm animals, they were only trying to help or rescue). Another way is to allege that they did not really put all of their effort into the performance, so it is atypical. This way, it is not the person that is at fault but the lack of effort. A final related process is self-handicapping. In anticipation of a negative evaluation, a person adopts a “handicap” that imposes inconsistency. In hoarding situations, these excuses could be poor health, low income, having to do it all themselves, etc.
- **Distinctiveness raising**—In this third set of tactics for lessening the transformed responsibility the person suggests that he or she has performed better in other circumstances, which suggests that they should be held less responsible for the current situation. An example of this might be the hoarder who claims they are currently in a financial or personal jam or having a specific unique set of new unanticipated problems that are preventing them from delivering the optimal care they usually provide. They may also want to discuss the [many] other animals they have helped. Diverting attention from the bad performance by emphasizing other areas where they have performed better increases the distinctiveness of the bad performance, thus minimizing the consequences.

**Summary**—For animal hoarders, our work suggests that animals may be an important identity-building device, and that care of the animals may be critical for the hoarder’s self-esteem. Given the extent of the lapses in care seen in hoarding situations and the degree to which self-esteem is tied to the animals and their care, the threat to self-esteem that would occur if the hoarder were to accept the reality of the situation seems substantial and even overwhelming. This may explain the great effort expended to explain away the situation.

Snyder points out that the excuse maker, particularly in a chronic situation, may not be aware that they are making excuses. This may be particularly likely when a self-image threat occurs repeatedly in a person’s life. Eventually, they fade from awareness and are performed out of habit. As excuses become more extreme and encompass more of a person’s life, they may become self-defeating

and gradually shift from being adaptive and normal to pathological. Snyder suggests that being highly aware of excuse making may make a person lose self-esteem. If this is true, then it could explain some of the high degree of denial observed when dealing with animal hoarders. Snyder also suggests that excuse making may eventually limit a person's range of responses to life events, and prohibit psychological growth because they merely feed on themselves.