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Appropriating Adulthood

There was a little farm. They had a cow and pigs and stuff. We thought this was crazy. Five or six of us went back there at night and we kept luring the cow to the electrified fence to shock himself, and he’d shock himself and then walk back. We kept on doing it and doing it because it was funny to us. It was entertainment for the people who were there. Something different. A rush.

—Business major, male, twenty years old

To those who treasure animals and want to protect them, intentional cruelty and extreme neglect are inexplicable crimes that demand some explanation. Unfathomable events, such as these, are just too disturbing to be flippantly dismissed. They cannot happen without a bad reason. While almost everyone wants to know why abusers harm animals, including humane law enforcement agents and the human victims of animal abuse, the abusers’ explanations are understandably simple and disconnected from their own reality. Agents, for instance, write off most cruelty to “ignorance.” If they just knew better, they would not harm animals. More extreme cases are written off to “sickness.” “Look what they do to children? They cut up little babies and stuff them into garbage cans. You have to put it into perspective—it’s a sick mind. A sick individual. I don’t think you can rehabilitate these people. I feel that it starts out with animals and goes on to humans.”

Humane agents do not understand the abusers’ perspective, one that makes their acts intelligible, reasonable, and even enjoyable to them, in part because capturing this perspective humanizes the enemy and comes dangerously close to justifying or excusing bad behavior. As we see in this chapter, agents are not alone in this regard. Many people, including mental health professionals, whose attempts to understand animal abusers lapse into tired formulaic explanations, join them. Even more disappointing, they cannot answer why cruelty is so common—even a rite of passage for some adolescents. By trying to fathom the
abuser’s “mind,” psychologists and psychiatrists have missed something larger and perhaps more important than the abuser’s personality—they have missed the abuser’s social context.

Until recently, understanding violence toward animals was the sole province of psychologists and animal welfare advocates (e.g., Ascione and Arkow 1999). Their approach sees animal abuse as an impulsive act that reflects psychopathological problems within the offender. In one typical psychiatric study (Tapia 1971), the author suggests that children who are cruel to animals suffer from hyperactivity, short attention span, irritability, temper, destructiveness, and brain damage leading to poor impulse control. Like bedwetting and fire setting, animal cruelty is one more sign of “impulsive character development” (Felthous 1980, 109). As such, the act of abuse has no social context and is likened to angry or irritable aggression that provides an emotional and perhaps rewarding release to aggressors.

From a psychological perspective, animal abuse provides sought-after emotion and reward. One approach holds that animal abuse displaces frustration by making the aggressor feel better. The displacement approach to abuse sees it as serving no purpose other than hurting animals and venting anger. In fact, until recently, mental health experts supported the therapeutic value of mundane animal abuse as a “healthy” form of displacement. Psychologists argued that dogs, in particular, were “satisfactory victims” for children in need of power. “The child who is commanded all day long may be commander over his dog. The child who is full of resentment over what he believes is his bad treatment by adults may kick at his dog. Though this use of a dog, if carried to extremes, is not exactly commendable, there is some therapeutic effect for children when indulged in within reason” (Bossard and Boll 1966, 128).

A second, and increasingly common, psychological approach to abuse posits an “angry child” with “destructive energy” that needs to be released. Unlike the displacement model that sees abuse as a safety valve to reduce internal pressure and further aggression, the graduation model argues that attacks on animals are early stages of a progression of aggressive responses that mature into later violence toward humans. Humane organizations, in particular, are quick to raise the specter of future Jeffrey Dahmers when asked to weigh in on the developmental significance of animal cruelty during childhood (e.g., Moulton, Kaufman,
and Filip 1991). Most cases of abuse, they claim, should be considered for their potential to forecast future violence. Pressure to pathologize abuse has led to its incorporation into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (APA 1994) as a warning sign of conduct disorder.

Yet, as discussed earlier, when researchers have studied the graduation model, their results have been mixed (Felthous and Kellert 1987). More recent sociological research on the relationship of animal abuse to subsequent violence highlights the fact that many cases appear to be terminal, not linked to later violence or other forms of antisocial behavior (Arluke et al. 1999). These results suggest that not all cases of abuse have the same significance, calling for researchers to examine the meaning and use of abuse when it does not escalate to serious aggression. Of course, parents or other authorities should dismiss no case of animal abuse. However, lumping together all instances of harming animals as impulsive and pathological does not allow for the possibility that abuse can be instrumental and normative, in the sense that abusers may gain things from their acts that are essential to and supported by the larger society.

To allow for this possibility, we need to listen closely to young adults who have abused animals to discover their perspective. The traditional psychological approach to cruelty does not give enough credit to children for their actions. The view that children are active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (e.g., Morrow 1998) and whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right (e.g., James and Prout 1990) raises an interesting question about the part that animal abuse plays in children’s lives.

Exploring this question demands that we establish how young adults define the social meaning of their abuse to understand why it does or does not occur. To capture their thinking and emotions, we must not assume that these youths are “psychopaths,” “cold-blooded killers,” or “sadists” who act impulsively without reason. Instead we must recognize that they have a complex subculture of their own worthy of serious study (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). This approach makes cruelty intelligible by constructing it as ordered and rational, unpacking the reasoning, logic, and decision making that inform the actions of abusers, as researchers have done with thieves, murderers, and other criminals (e.g., Katz 1988). If some abusers describe their actions as fun and thrilling, then we need to discover what this experience means, feels,
sounds, tastes, or looks like to them. In short, the development of a general theory of animal abuse must go beyond narrow psychiatric models to include interactional theories of behavior that can approach “cruelty” as a complicated phenomenon having different meanings and consequences for different types of animal abusers (Agnew 1998), as has been done with other kinds of human experiences with animals (Arluke and Sanders 1996).

From this perspective, more is going on than abusing animals simply to discharge pent-up frustration or to release anger. Although we may not be able to answer why children pull off the wings of flies, we can examine how this experience lives on in the memories of adolescents and young adults who went through it when younger. This approach can tell us how adolescents understand their prior actions toward animals and what role, if any, this prior abuse plays as adolescents move into adulthood. Sociological research on children’s play suggests that some expressions of animal abuse may qualify as play. Children’s play is never idle in the sense that it can teach them things. If it existed, idle play would teach children nothing. On the contrary, children learn through “ordinary play” and what they learn is diverse, with some of it relating to the development of their moral selves (Mead 1934) and their future ability to assume adult roles (Borman and Lippincott 1982).

Sometimes, however, such play can be offensive to those given the task of guiding children’s development. For example, it is common for preadolescent boys to engage in a class of activities that includes aggressive pranks, sexual talk, and racist remarks. Fine (1986) argues that these forms of activities, or “dirty play,” are connected to the child’s social development, much as is ordinary play. Although adults usually view dirty play as childish or immature, children do not. On the contrary, by engaging in what is described as “deep play” (Geertz 1972), children are interpreting where they stand in the social scheme of things and mastering what is ordinarily denied them by more powerful others (Piaget 1962). They are attempting to live up to adult standards of behavior and address claim-making issues from which they had been excluded. As a claim-making behavior, each instance of dirty play makes a implicit statement about the rights of preadolescents to engage in a set of activities and to have a set of opinions in the face of adult counter pressures.

There is good reason to extend Fine’s (1986, 1988) model of how children shape their identities. Certainly, the process of identity shaping in
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childhood, and the need to experiment with claim-making behavior, is not resolved in preadolescence or limited to boys. Boys and girls continue to struggle with their transition out of adolescence by living up to adult standards of behavior. If anything, older adolescents are likely to be more preoccupied and perhaps feel more urgency about becoming adults than are their younger peers. Play will continue to be a vital mechanism in efforts to explore and claim these new identities, although the specific types of play involved may be quite different from the aggressive pranks, sexual talk, and racist remarks noted by Fine among younger children. Compared with these activities, other types of play will entail more serious deviance where the risks to adolescents are larger and the outcomes more valued than those obtained from aggressive pranks and the like.

To what extent is Fine’s (1986, 1988) analysis applicable to more deviant forms of dirty play? In particular, does it help us to understand the experience of animal abuse by children and adolescents? This chapter explores three questions, in this regard. First, will young adults consider more deviant variants of dirty play as fun, despite their unsavory character and potential to stigmatize? If so, then animal abuse should be recalled as a special kind of play with an exciting edge, unlike everyday forms of play that are merely “fun.” Second, does the added risk of dirty play, when it involves more serious forms of deviance, offer greater rewards to adolescents in terms of what they learn and the kinds of adults they become? If so, then animal abuse as dirty play should entail far-reaching appropriations of adult culture. And third, do deviant variants of dirty play have some positive outcome as children enter into adulthood in terms of their presentation of self, no longer claiming that it is “just good fun,” instead experiencing guilt and shame over it? If so, then animal abuse should pay off as children enter young adulthood, now admonishing themselves for their prior acts.

Playing Seriously

People undergo an endless stream of social experiences over a lifetime, but most of these experiences are trivial. Trivial social experiences have little impact beyond the time in which they transpire and are forgotten almost as soon as they are concluded. Other social experiences, however, are consequential and unforgettable. They have a lasting impact
on people’s lives and are remembered long after the experience took place (Athens 1989).

Animal abuse had this significance for students. It is interesting, in this regard, that some students claimed to have long forgotten their former cruelty but recalled it in great detail when asked, while many others seemed never to have forgotten their experience and remembered it vividly. The recollections of the students who spoke about their former abuse with great subtlety and immediacy have some parallels to the recollections of adults who recount childhood traumas to themselves or passages to new statuses in minute physical and emotional detail, such as how those present were dressed and how they felt at the time.

The significance of experiencing abuse was not evident at the beginning of many interviews. Several features of abuse lead students to compare it to idle play. First, it was seen as “just one of the things that we were up to, to fight boredom.” As a form of everyday play, students remembered their abuse as an “entertaining” distraction, given limited appealing options. For example, in one case, a student described her drowning and burning of kittens as an activity to combat her boredom: “It was fun at the time, but I can’t answer why. I just thought it was. I don’t know how else to explain it. We didn’t have anything to do besides having work and stuff. You were finished with your yard chores. You were finished with everything and the adults wouldn’t let you be glued to the TV. It was like we didn’t have anything to do and we’re bored, so it’s like, ‘Okay, let’s go torture some cats.’”

Second, students likened their abuse to specific examples of play. Some compared their abuse to playing Nintendo games or burning toy soldiers, others to sports. “It was more to occupy the time,” one student reported. “Usually I skateboard. ‘You wanna go out and do something today?’ just meant we’re going skateboarding. This day was just hot. It was like ‘We’re not going to skateboard, it’s too hot. Let’s fill the time up with something.’ Shooting animals just appealed to us for the day.” Another said: “On certain days, we’d play basketball, but on other days, we’d feel like shooting birds. I’d either ask friends to come over and shoot birds or come over to play basketball.”

Students also claimed that the psychology behind their abuse resembled that of everyday play. One reason they gave was that they did not remember losing control of their emotions and becoming explosively
violent. Had they lost control of their emotions when harming animals, students claimed that it would have been harder to define their acts as mere play. Unchecked, intense emotions would have suggested something more serious than play; so would have intent to harm animals. Another reason is that, students claimed their cruelty was idle play because there had been no intent to torture or kill animals. As one student said, “We didn’t go, ‘Let’s go kill some birds and hang them on the wall.’ It was just to hit them. And as soon as we started to hit the targets, they would have a problem with their wings. That hit home ‘cause all they do is fly. So I would feel guilty after.” Another student felt that his abuse was play because it was not premeditated: “I wasn’t like all out burning the cat’s head off. It was still play. We were doing it for fun. It wasn’t like I had this devious plan—like I’m going to my cousin’s house to torture the cat.”

Finally, students remembered their abuse as idle play because they claimed to have kept it within certain bounds. Some thought they limited their abuse to psychological torment, inflicting no physical harm. In one case, the student described teasing a cat but not causing it serious physical harm. As he recounted, “I thought it was funny what we did to the cat. It was mean, but it was not harmful I guess, at least not physically harmful. We’d tape its two front legs together, and it was funny to watch. It was like a kangaroo.” To prevent pain, the student applied a special tape that did not pull hair when removed. When physical harm was involved, students claimed to have limited their abuse as well, stopping themselves from causing excessive suffering. One student remembered: “I definitely made sure that I didn’t hurt it. I made sure that we were just having fun, and maybe it would get hurt a little but nothing serious or that I could get into trouble for. I’d get scared if I actually broke its leg and it was hobbling around. I’d feel bad. I definitely had limits.” For other students, the possibility of death checked their actions. One student said he “only wanted to toy” with the parakeets that he harmed: “We didn’t try to kill them. I didn’t squeeze it hard or smash it or anything like that.” Students also considered their abuse to be play because they claimed to have limited the duration of their animal tormenting. As one student recounted: “We wouldn’t always just sit home and do this [abuse] for hour on hour. We’d do it for a little while, and then we’d go out and actually do something.”
As students explored their memories in the context of the interview’s quickening rapport, however, it became clear that they did not regard their abuse as ordinary play. They remembered their animal abuse as having a serious edge that distinguished it from everyday play in general or normal play with animals (Mechling 1989). “Like with hide and go seek,” one student explained, “it’s fun. But it’s hide and go seek. Like what can you do really? This stuff [cruelty] was more serious.”

The emotions associated with abuse were different from and more intense than those associated with regular play. Students remembered their cruelty as a “thrilling” childhood activity that provided them with strong positive or negative emotions, unlike memories of everyday play. Being cruel to animals gave one student what he described as a feeling similar to the “rush” he felt before playing in a “big game.” “You definitely feel something different,” he explained. “Just before you do it, you feel that difference. Right before you play a big game or something, you get this feeling, kind of a rush. That’s what it’s like. It’s like a rush.” Another student spoke about a similar rush, comparing abuse to wrestling with his friends. “See, we might just be like playing around wrestling, but then we get a little serious and we started getting angry at each other and you started wrestling—like trying to hurt each other. That’s when you get that feeling of a super rush, when you hit him and he hits you and you realize that it’s not like a game anymore.”

Some students were drawn to the challenge of carrying out abuse. For example, living targets were more difficult to hit than were inanimate objects. As a student explained, “It was fun to shoot, to begin with, even at stationary targets. I’d take a milk jug and throw it out in the lawn and we’d shoot it around. But it was more fun to shoot at moving things, especially if you couldn’t predict where it was going. Like, if you throw something and you shoot at it, you know it’s going up, it’s going down. Where these [squirrels], they’re going here, they’re going there, you know what I mean?” Another student recalled, “When my friend got his gun it was like ‘cool.’ And we were shooting cans, and then it was like let’s see if we can shoot a moving target. So that had a lot to do with it. It was a challenge. It was a lot more difficult than throwing up a can in the air and shooting it. This was something, not that they can reason, but they knew to run.”

The coolness of abuse stemmed from its “exciting” consequences—living targets responded unpredictably when harmed. One student, for
example, described the “fun” of tormenting a hamster: “A lot of people would think it’s mean, but I had fun seeing what happened. I put a blow dryer up to a hamster and saw what happened to him. All his food and stuff went all over his face.” Another student recalled that he did not “think about hurting” a rabbit when he and his friend shot it with a BB gun. Instead, the two of them focused on seeing the rabbit “flip,” and that response made it interesting and cool to them. As one student claimed, “We used to shoot road signs and trees and stuff, but that wasn’t really exciting. That wasn’t as good as hitting a bird. It was about hearing them cry out.”

Students remembered their play as cool because their abusive interactions with animals had a pseudo-human quality; animals responded to abuse in ways that were similar to the reactions of humans with whom students played. One student, for example, compared her animal abuse to playing tag: “I would torture this neighborhood dog. I used to get the vacuum and tease him and he’d be howling forever. He hated it. He was so scared, so I used to go after him with it. I liked his reaction. It was like playing tag. You run after a person to tag him, then you run away because they are going to get you back. That was the thing with the dog.” Another student said that he had “pushed” animals to get a certain reaction, much as he did with people: “They got so fed up, they reacted. I used to do that with my cousins too. Try to see the point where somebody just loses it and they’re going to punch you. I guess I tested them to see where they would break and they can’t take it anymore.”

These recollections of abuse as serious and cool resonate with Thorne’s (1993) description of cross-gender borderwork among children. Although such play is episodic, like animal abuse, its dramatic, ritualistic, and highly emotional qualities make it particularly memorable. It is not just “play” or “fun” because more is going on at an unarticulated and volatile level as ambiguous meanings and culturally expected identities are explored and experienced. Play, according to Thorne, is a fragile definition despite efforts by participants to maintain boundaries between play and not-play; more serious meanings lurk close to the surface as children use cross-gender play to try on, enact, and perpetuate cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, the thrill of animal abuse as play is due to the opportunity it affords adolescents to contemplate, sample, and appropriate adult identities.
Chapter Two

**Appropriating Adult Culture**

Memories of strong emotional reactions, such as those described above, are a major reason why animal abuse is remembered as different and more serious than everyday play. However, as a type of serious play, animal abuse is much more than a recollection of strong emotion. Students remembered their troublesome acts against animals as cool and thrilling because these are part of the process of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro 1992) whereby children usurp adult information to address their own confusions, fears, and uncertainties, including those relating to their transition out of adolescence into adulthood. What makes the memory endure as a thrilling experience, then, is that it is part of a larger process whereby adult identity emerges in adolescents as they appropriate adult culture.

Engaging in such behavior, adolescents form, belong to, and maintain their own peer culture that tries not only to make sense of the adult world but to resist and challenge adult standards and authority by asserting autonomy and control over their own lives or those of other living creatures. For the students examined in this chapter, this resistance provided an opportunity, even if briefly, to try on and exercise four kinds of adult-like powers that were sought after by their younger, curious selves. They took charge of their transition into adulthood by keeping adult-like secrets, drawing adult-like boundaries, doing adult-like activities, and gathering and confirming adult-like knowledge.

*Keeping Adult-like Secrets*

Adults in organizational settings commonly resort to a variety of secondary adjustments to lessen the institution’s power over their behaviors and identities (Goffman 1961). Children, too, in the face of organizational restrictions will evade adult rules through jointly created and concealed secondary adjustments that enable them to gain some control over their lives in these settings (Corsaro 1997). The problem of gaining control over one’s life is more pronounced in the context of formal organizations, whether nursery schools or mental asylums, than it is in everyday life, yet the issue is no less important in the latter setting, especially in childhood and adolescence when adult standards of behavior are first being discovered, made sense of, and perhaps experienced as unduly constraining or even oppressive.
In both everyday life and formal organizations, these control-enhancing secondary adjustments are concealed from authority figures. Control afforded through concealment, when it occurs in childhood and adolescence, can be part of a transition into adulthood. A child’s sense of control derives as much from carrying off this concealment as it does from the rule-breaking activities themselves. The awareness that one has the power to remain silent, which comes from the experience of keeping and sharing secrets (Bok 1982), is linked to the understanding that one can exert control over events and that one is not at the mercy of adults. From the child’s perspective, part of the allure and power of adulthood comes from the control of information. Parents and other authority figures are perceived as privileged by having access to private and perhaps controversial knowledge of others. Conversely, children may feel that they have no secrets from adults, at least regarding morally controversial matters. Secret keeping is therefore empowering because the ownership of privileged information, from the child’s perspective, is a marker of adulthood.

Students I interviewed felt they were piercing adult morality when they took pains to hide their animal cruelty from the scrutiny and presumed criticism of adults. If “found out” they believed that adults would berate them because they had violated moral standards regarding the proper treatment of animals. The belief that parents, animal owners, or other adult authority figures would berate them for their acts, if discovered, made students feel as though they were “getting away” with something wrong. The secret of wrongdoing gave special meaning to abuse. It was a serious offense, from the students’ perspective, because in their imaginations it could elicit a strong reaction from adults and was by definition in a different category from other, tamer play that did not test adult moral standards or risk punishment if caught doing it. There was a nasty or antisocial side to abuse that was unlike ordinary play. As a student recounted, “It’s just basically playing around, but in a malicious sort of way.” A few compared their abuse to “petty” crime. One student compared the “fun” of luring a cow to an electrified fence to other “hell raising” and “common, petty vandalism, like throwing eggs at cars, stealing signs, smashing mailboxes, and snooping around the neighbor’s houses.”

So they took pains to hide their abuse from adult authorities. One student, for instance, recalled his abuse of cats as something he did “behind
closed doors” to prevent discovery by his parents. He elaborated, “We weren’t gonna get in trouble for this because nobody was gonna know about it. I didn’t want parents to know.” Another student talked about concealing his actions from camp counselors: “We would hunt chipmunks with rocks—I remember skinning one. I cut the tail off and it kind of slipped right off. That amazed me. It just slipped off like that. I was definitely aware that I shouldn’t be doing this. We didn’t want to get caught by the counselors.” Another student talked about hiding his animal abuse from teachers, as he and his friends “would poison fish that were in the classrooms with bleach and cleaning products. So nobody would say anything, we would only kill a couple of them [otherwise] they’d know right away.”

Many claimed that this hiding contributed to the “rush” of tormenting or killing animals, a description that has been used with other adolescent risk-taking behaviors (Lightfoot 1997). Abusing animals, according to students, was not the end they sought. Their primary goal was to risk getting caught. As one student said, his abuse was “exciting” because adults could “discover” his actions: “I was afraid that I would get caught by someone. I got more like a rush from just the fact that any minute somebody could turn around a corner. It was more like fear that made the whole situation exciting. Part of the thrill [of abuse] was the idea that we might get caught by the people in the house. We used to think of all these plans to get back because we would do stuff to try and get ourselves on the edge of getting caught and see if we could get away with it.” Another student compared the “fun” of abusing animals to the fun of “sneaking out” with friends at night: “It was a little bit off color. That definitely did play a part in it. It was sort of like when we used to sneak out of the house in seventh grade and go see our friends at night. Once my parents knew I was going out, it wasn’t really as fun. A lot of the fun is the risk. If my parents found out they would have killed me. I would have gotten in a lot of trouble. That’s what made it fun because you’re not supposed to do it. It’s knowing that if you get caught doing this, then you’re in trouble. It’s like a risk. At that age it was a big one—getting yelled at by your parents.”

While they claimed to have enjoyed the risk of getting caught, students took steps to avoid it, such as abusing animals in ways that would not be discovered easily by others. In one case, the student decided against burning a cat because that would be hard to conceal from adults.
As he said, “I knew I could get into trouble. I knew if I burned a cat, the family was gonna—you just can’t ignore that. I thought it was all right to smack it around because nobody would know. I didn’t want anybody to know. Even then I didn’t want parents to know. We didn’t want to get into trouble.” Also, to avoid detection, students said they did not abuse animals in certain places or at certain times. As one student commented, “We did it away from the house. We were always careful where we did it and when we did it. If my parents came out and saw it, I am sure they would have been like, ‘What the hell are you doing?’”

Measures such as these allowed students to create and experience their furtive abuse in a relatively safe way with the support and aid of peers. Sequestered acts and private information bestowed upon students a sense of power, as does privileged knowledge or even gossip among adults (Levin and Arluke 1986). Breaking adult rules and keeping this information from adult authorities empowered them simply because they could do what they did and “get away” with it. In the end, abuse made it possible for them to have and share a secret that simultaneously signified both their independence from and their co-opting of adult culture.

**Drawing Adult-like Boundaries**

Children learn that boundary issues are significant to adults. They see that if adults regard certain people as “not us,” they become suitable subjects for scorn or attack. When speaking about their former cruelty, students appeared to mirror the significance of such boundary drawing, except “not us” became animals rather than people. In one case, the student talked about how, from his child’s perspective, harming cats was different from harming people: “The cat wasn’t—I didn’t consider a cat a person. It’s not like I’d go beat up people. I felt bad when I beat up people. I always felt bad. But with the cat, it wasn’t really important to me.” To another student, classifying animals as “not us” was more complex than merely distinguishing humans from all nonhuman animals: “Killing an insect wasn’t as bad as killing a bird, which wasn’t as bad as killing a squirrel, which wasn’t as bad as . . .”

At one extreme, some students said that only insects were remote enough to qualify for abuse. All other living creatures were off limits. In this regard, a student spoke about how she was comfortable abusing flies, ants, and other bugs, but not frogs. “We just took the legs right off
of flies. We thought it was fun. We took one wing off to see if they could still fly. And centipedes, I used to cut those with a knife, stick, anything. When I would touch them, they would roll up in a ball, so I used to play with them. And ladybugs, they were in the shower. So I put soap on them to see if they would die. And with my friend, we would light up on fire whole ant trails or we tried to burn them with a magnifying glass. I think that was cruelty. I was torturing something, but it was okay to me then because they were insects. I thought they had no purpose in life. It was kind of cool to just kill them. But when my friend took a frog and hit it to play frog ball, that was when I was like, ‘No, that’s wrong.’ When I actually saw their eyes, I kind of felt sorry for them. I was like, ‘No, leave the frog alone.’"

At the other extreme, students drew boundaries that included many “higher” species as “not us,” making them eligible targets for abuse. Domestic animals were most often spared the designation of target. A typical comment flatly ruled out all cats and dogs: “Like I would never—like I have dogs, I have a cat, and a bird. I would never think of touching them, but for some reason with frogs it didn’t seem like a big deal. It just didn’t. Back then I didn’t think it was mean, like I looked at them differently. It just didn’t seem like on the same level as a cat or dog or something for some reason.” Another student felt that birds or squirrels were “not us” compared to pets, which were part of the family: “Dogs and cats are like the closest things to humans compared to like a bird or a squirrel. I remember shooting birds and squirrels for fun and that didn’t bother me at all because they are not like part of the family—like, ‘Oh he’s my little pet.’ Some families treat animals like kids.”

There was no consensus, however, about which domestic animals were off limits to abuse. Some students saw only certain cats and dogs as “not us,” claiming never to hurt their own animals but abusing those owned by other people. As one student explained: “You know, I never really abused any of my cats, to tell you the truth. It was always like I’d be over my friend’s house or my cousin’s house and they always had cats. So when I was a kid, I used to tie them in a bag and spin them around, or tie them in a bag and smack one side, then smack the other side, so they wouldn’t know where to get out.” Other students claimed not to have abused cats and dogs if they or others owned them, but those without proper domestic status were targeted for abuse. As one student noted, “Strays I would throw. But if it was someone’s—like if
I knew it belonged to somebody, I wouldn’t do that. But if it was a stray, like a stray cat, I would have thrown it. I didn’t like boot them, but I kicked them.”

If owned and treated as pets, animals other than cats and dogs might also be spared mistreatment because of their special status. Students recalled being confused about the propriety of harming these “lower” animals because in their eyes they were not full-fledged pets and therefore could be victimized. Recognizing that animals such as rabbits were owned as pets gave students pause but did not necessarily stop them from inflicting harm. “Maybe if rabbits were more of a household pet,” one student said, “I would have thought twice about it [harming the rabbit]. They’re not that popular a pet and it’s not really as much of a domestic animal. It was a wild rabbit. I never really had a kinship with any kind of rabbit.”

In quite a different manner, students appropriated the adultlike ability to draw boundaries. Through their collaboration in abuse, students explored adult’s facility in drawing boundaries between human in and out groups. Learning to establish boundaries and their moral significance entails both excluding others as “not us” and including others in one’s inner circle as “us.” Those who are allowed or encouraged to harm “not us” usually are seen as most “like us.” To the students, abuse of animals was a ritual of inclusion, an event for including those deemed closest. When students recalled their former abuse as fun because it was done as a group activity with their playmates, it was clear as they spoke that this companionship was more important to them than the abuse of animals. In fact, many seemed nostalgic about their prior harm of animals because it was an opportunity to spend time with friends in the face of what were perceived as less attractive options “to do something.” As one student said, “The hunting of chipmunks in a group would be kind of like a clanny, bonding kind of thing. Or when we trapped a big lizard in my friend’s backyard. We all took turns shooting it, and it took a long time to die.” Like a child’s “mooning,” “egging,” or other pranks, students often “got away with something” as part of a group activity, with their best friends as collaborators. One typical report, for example, recounted how a student took turns with friends as they tortured insects: “I was between five and seven, and I was hanging out with a couple of friends in the front yard. One of us got the bright idea to start messing around
with bugs, and we captured some flies and some grasshoppers. I don’t know exactly how the mechanics worked, but we took turns pulling the wings off the flies, burning the grasshoppers—someone got a lighter from their parents who smoked. I remember that part of the reason I did it was because everyone else was, and I wanted to fit in with the group.” Of the twenty-five students studied, only two reported harming animals by themselves.

In the vast majority of cases, students claimed that friends initiated or strongly encouraged the abuse. For example, when one student was asked why he shot a rabbit, he said: “I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that I was with John. It was actually his idea to begin with. I don’t think it would have occurred to me, ‘Hey, let’s shoot a round at the rabbit.’ If I was alone with a gun, I’d probably watch TV and not even touch the gun.” Another student recalled firing a BB gun at a cat because he was “dared” to do so by a friend: “There was this neighborhood cat, it was always hissing and scratching people. So one of the guys took out a BB gun one day and dared each of us to fire at it. And we all did. That was something that was done in secret—we never told our parents about it.” And yet another student talked about being “egged on” to abuse animals: “Your friends, they see you do it [abuse] once, and they egg you on for the second time.”

Friends rewarded students whose play violated adult civil behavior. According to students, their primary concern was not to make animals suffer but to gain renown, even if momentarily, for being daring—and the status and identity attribution that followed. One student recalled that he and his friends vied for whose animal abuse “could be cool—who could come up with the funniest thing [type of cruelty], you know?” To another student, the goal of abuse was to be seen by peers as a wise guy.” As he said, “It was just mischief to see who could be the wise guy and not get caught.” And if not competitive, students and their friends were strongly supportive of each other’s “successful” abuse. One student recalled shooting birds: “It wasn’t really competition because we’d all be happy for each other if you hit them.” And yet another spoke about how being cruel to animals gave status to members of his group: “Like the cat thing [thrown off roof], I think the motive—if I came up with the idea, that would place me in the creative part of our group. A lot of us in the group wanted to be the popular people in school, but we just weren’t. By doing this [cruelty], it defined our
roles in the smaller group and it at least made us feel comfortable with what we were doing.”

As a ritual of inclusion and exclusion, whether between humans and animals or between humans, animal abuse allowed students to designate what constituted “us” and “not us” and to find meaning in boundary demarcation in ways that corresponded to classifications made in adult culture. As adolescents they were continuing the kinds of preadolescent clique dynamics observed by Adler and Adler (1998) that teach them to reproduce society’s feelings of differentiation between in-groups and out-groups. Certainly, the mistreatment of animals is not the only device children and adolescents use to build and maintain peer-group boundaries, but it certainly should be recognized as an important and perhaps common one. Like other techniques of out-group subjugation that children see as “just fun to do,” such as picking on lower-status individuals, badly treating animals that are perceived as outsiders helps maintain a group’s exclusivity and contribute to its cohesion.

**Doing Adultlike Activities**

Animal abuse can be inspired by children’s interest in being like adults, particularly when what they do is forbidden. As was true with acts of abuse for other reasons, these instances were less about causing harm to animals than they were about making claims. Harming animals was a means for these children to become interlopers of adult statuses.

For example, some students saw animal abuse as a way to experience and rehearse an adult form of hunting, based on what they saw and heard from parents, relatives, acquaintances, and popular culture. Some did acknowledge that as children they realized there was a difference between their cruelty and genuine hunting, the latter called “hunting” by one student. Another remembered: “My friend’s father was a big hunter, so we were like, ‘We should try it.’ But it wasn’t like we went out with blinds and camouflage.” And yet another recalled distinguishing his uncle’s hunting from his own, saying, “I sort of hunted, but what my uncle did was much neater. I almost glorified it because he was at the top—he had guides, he had videos, he had trophies.”

They also distinguished their “hunting” from the perceived adult version of it in a different way. Many remembered feeling uneasy when their activities came too close to the real thing. Some students, for example, claimed that they were troubled if their hunts led to the death of
animals because, ironically, they did not want to “harm” them. In one case, the student and his friend succeeded in shooting a possum but suspected that it was not dead. If they left the animal alive, it would presumably suffer, and that would constitute “harm” in their opinion. So they made sure it was dead for the animal’s sake rather than for the conquest of hunting.

Nevertheless, students saw their hunting as fun and thrilling because it resembled the adult version. One feature that made it adultlike was that they used weapons to torture or kill animals. When asked to account for their prior behavior, some students claimed that they had no interest in hurting animals but were preoccupied with firing various weapons that adults often discouraged or prohibited. One student talked about the allure of using “weapons” that made it seem as though he was on a hunt: “[We wanted] whatever explosive or firearm we could get our hands on [as long as] it could kill. We also loved burning things with magnifying glasses. These [explosing, shooting, burning] were better than just throwing them [animals] in the air. The weapons like the explosives were very interesting and I loved them. I knew it was sketchy and not right, but it was fun. It was like hunting, looking for them and then finding and getting them. That’s exciting.”

A second feature of their hunting that made it adultlike was that it involved “planning.” One student said of his approach to shooting birds, “It involved a sort of hunt, planning it out, even though it was cheesy. We got the cereal. We put it out there to see if birds came. We’d change the food—bread, croutons, whatever they were. There was a planning to it, a method—loading the gun, hiding, keeping your sight on the target, survival techniques, as childish as it may sound, it’s true.” Similarly, another student spoke of the excitement of stalking and successfully hitting animals during hunts with friends: “We used to go back in the woods, and you’d search around back there, you’d just walk around trying to find an animal to shoot. And it was a thrill, it was a rush, it made your heart pound. If you hit it, then you’d feel like you accomplished something.”

“Hunting” also made students feel as though they were developing certain adult “skills.” One student, for example, talked about honing his marksmanship abilities on squirrels: “I’d hit one with my BB gun; they would react vigorously, but they wouldn’t die. And then this one squirrel, I shot about five times and it kept on popping up, but it would
never die. It was fun to shoot the BB gun at them. It helped me learn to shoot straight and skills like that.” Another student talked about how he acquired a blowgun as part of his adolescent interest in “ninja stuff” and used it to hunt a duck. However, he claimed his interest was not to kill this animal but to practice his shooting skills.

Certainly “hunting” was not the only way that students remembered their abuse as a rehearsal of adult behaviors, although it was the most common way. Students saw their animal abuse as constraining the behavior of animals that were seen as overstepping their “limits,” whether that involved barking “too loudly,” biting “too hard,” or defecating on the family rug. Some likened their animal abuse to parents who discipline bad behavior in children. If students saw animals behaving in ways that seemed to violate adult codes of conduct, their abuse could be seen as similar to the exercise of control by parents. For example, when students spoke about abusing “misbehaving animals,” their actions can easily be interpreted as attempts to exert the type of control over someone or something to which the child is regularly subject at the hands of adults, whether that might be constant reprimands or spankings. In these instances, animal victims became surrogate humans who violated norms, and their harm mocked how students envisioned adults responding to deviance. Thus, one student spoke about how she “spanked” a dog because it misbehaved: “I would visit these neighbors, and they had a poodle named Spot. And the poodle was the nicest dog—sweet, very sweet. Once a day, I would take the dog for a walk. This one time I was mean to the dog. I was tugging on the leash and I hit it. You know, I spanked it for no reason. I would purposely make the dog do something wrong, like make it walk when it wasn’t supposed to. This continued for about ten minutes. I probably hit him half a dozen times. I was belting it. I was spanking it, like you would whack the dog for wetting the floor.” As Corsaro (1997) observes, such acts reflect children’s focus on adult’s power over them, especially in physical ways. Their response to this powerless through animal abuse, as a form of dirty play, differs in important ways from psychological displacement models of the same act. By seeing abuse as simple displacement, the significance of the act is limited to seeing it as a coping technique to improve a child’s mood state. As dirty play, however, the child’s casting of abuse as similar to the expression of power and control by adults permits us to understand it instrumentally, rather
than impulsively, as part of a larger social process of appropriating adult culture.

Others saw their animal abuse as a test of membership in the adult world of work. In these cases, animal abuse was seen as a way to nurture skills that adults were thought to possess in various occupations. One student remembered beheading cats to test his future ability to work for the secret service: “I’m not sure this is exactly the right word, but like [it had] something to do with personal development. Like I’ve always had the fantasy of one day being in the secret service or something like that, and I know there’s a lot of questionable things you need to do in terms of— maybe you need to assassinate a human being or you’re ordered to— I was wondering if I was capable of that kind of disconnection.”

In short, whether it was hunting, disciplining, working, or engaging in other adult-like activities, animal abuse facilitated students’ youthful exploration of a variety of adult social roles. Thus, abuse was not the end but a means by which students could cross age-status boundaries to rehearse their imagined future participation in adult society. Although students appeared anxious to assume adult statuses, they felt ill-equipped to do so because too little trustworthy knowledge was available about the workings of the social and physical worlds around them. Abuse was a way to get this sought after knowledge.

Gathering and Confirming Adult-like Knowledge

Students remembered their former cruelty as a device to verify information from adults or to create it when unavailable. According to students, this information was suspect because being told something by adults did not guarantee its accuracy. From the abuser’s perspective, then, cruelty was a tool to gather firsthand knowledge that could be trusted. At the least, by taking this approach, students challenged the assumption that children automatically accept the “factual” veracity of the adult world.

Students commonly spoke of their “curiosity” to “see for themselves” what others had told them to be true. In one case, the student said that he and his friends gave Alka-seltzer to a pigeon that subsequently died to conduct a test because “I heard that it would kill them and I wanted to see for myself whether it would.” Another student explained why he stoned and hurt a skunk, saying “I was curious to see what would
happen if I hit it. Would it spray a mist or a stream of water or what? I guess I didn’t know what was going to happen and I just needed to see what would happen.” And yet another student described her disbelief in what adults told her about the ability of cats to survive falls from great heights. Because she doubted this was true but was curious about the validity of the idea, she decided to test its accuracy by dropping a cat off the second story of her home.

Sometimes students recalled their curiosity as a method to obtain information that adults withheld from them. For example, one student said that he was frustrated as a child because he could not acquire information about death, forcing him to explore this topic by abusing animals: “I always had an interest in death and stuff. When you’re young, you don’t know a lot about questions about life and death and stuff like that. You know, they don’t teach you about death in school or anything and you can’t do it to [kill] another person. You’re curious, you know, and I didn’t want to go out and kill somebody and cut them up. I was curious about death, curious about harm. I was curious about what you can do to something living. At the time, I had my own theories. What I did to animals was a way to learn this.”

Many students remembered their curiosity as having had some general intellectual purpose. They recalled their former acts as driven by “wonder” about how their cruelty would affect animals. As one student said of her abuse of centipedes: “I would cut it up and try to see if it would live. The whole thing was curiosity. I wondered what would happen. Cutting them, I wanted to see what they were like inside.” Another student spoke similarly of her treatment of cockroaches: “We would put a toothpick through a cockroach, and it would keep crawling. It just kept walking, so we were like, ‘Wow.’ We picked it up. It was fascinating trying to see if it would croak.” And yet another student said of his burning of insects: “It was curiosity— trying to, I don’t know what it was curiosity about, but mostly it was, ‘What would happen if we did this?’ I didn’t have any hypothesis, any thinking, beyond ‘What’s going to happen if we did this?’”

Some of this curiosity was to confirm specific cultural knowledge or beliefs, especially the saying that cats have nine lives. For example, one student explained: “We lived in a two-story house, and we used to always want to know if a cat really had nine lives. So we would kick them down the stairs and make them fall. Instead of landing on their
legs, they would roll over and keep running. We were just curious besides being mean.” Indeed, several students mentioned curiosity about a cat’s ability to survive substantial falls, including one who remembered that he was “surprised” and “amazed” after he dropped a cat off a balcony: “We were drinking beer, just having a good time. My parents were out of town. We were like, ‘Yeah, I heard cats always land on their feet.’ So, we had like a balcony upstairs. We were like let’s see if we drop the cat off here, if he’ll land on his feet. We didn’t think it would be that bad, it was only about ten feet. We just dropped it off there and surprisingly, amazingly, it did have nine lives.” This student went on to compare it to “the public hangings that they used to have. I guess this was something like, ‘Hey, let’s go watch. This is interesting.’ It was like, we did it, that’s neat.”

Other students remembered their cruelty as a form of “experimentation” on animals that was both fun and a source of knowledge, however rudimentary or redundant, though a few students viewed their experimenting more as a “crazy thing” rather than as a form of knowledge creation or verification. In one such case, the student described his experimentation on frogs: “We’d try to catch stuff in the woods. If it was something like a squirrel, we’d just try to kill it. But if it was something like a frog, we’d try to catch it and experiment with it a little. We used to play Frisbee with them. Throw them and catch them. We would do crazy things like that, not for any purpose, not to learn anything, just to like harm it. We would just throw it back and forth, and we didn’t know if it was still alive or not because we would just keep tossing it. Yellow stuff would come out of it and stuff like that.” Similarly, another student talked about feeling “pumped up” when he “experimented” on fish by stabbing them: “Instead of putting them in the bucket, I would throw them on the rocks, watch them flop around, take a knife and just drop it from a certain height. They would like wince. When it pierced them you could see the blood and they would flap around a lot more. And then you would stop for a little bit and then you’d drop it again and they’d start flipping. It’s like experimenting. It’s like, ‘Wow, that’s cool.’ That gets you pumped up and you just keep going.”

Yet many students talked genuinely about their prior interest in “experimenting” on animals, usurping this concept from the adult world where talk of experimentation gave credibility to the use of animals in ways normally disallowed. To students, the fun of this form of
experimentation came from using ingenious methods to harm animals, with the methods themselves holding the students’ interest because they seemed novel, illegal, or creative to them and because their use would allow students to observe certain responses in animals that they could predict but wanted to cause and witness themselves. In such cases, developing and using methods of “experimentation” were in themselves more appealing to students than causing animals to suffer. For example, one student described how it was “cool” for him to invent unusual ways to “experiment” on and kill frogs after catching them with fishing poles: “My friend John would spin the frog around and around the pole, so it would get some good momentum. I would take a paddle and the next time the frog came around, I’d just sort of wind up and give him a good smack. And then you usually lose about half the frog. And we’d do that until the frog was all gone. It was like, ‘Let’s see what it can take.’ Like an experiment. Sometimes, the larger ones would take a couple hits before it was all gone.” Another student talked about how it was “fun” to build and use a “stun gun” to “experiment” on his cat, for which he claimed fondness.

Comments such as these paint a picture of adolescents who crossed intellectual barriers through their harm of animals. Knowledge whose accuracy was doubted or knowledge that was unavailable could be gained, from the perspective of children, through firsthand exploration with animals. Once again, abuse appeared not to be an end in itself but a means, albeit an unfortunate choice of method, by which students questioned the adult world’s truthfulness and undertook an adultlike “experimental” approach to satisfy more than just their simple “curiosity.”

**The Payoff**

Fine (1986) maintains that as children grow older and their needs for presentation of self change, they no longer regard their former dirty play as fun. Instead, they see it as morally offensive, and they feel guilty. This “payoff” of dirty play was evident among many students in this study, who as young adults seemed, on the whole, quite different from the “wilders” of popular culture who seek fun to relieve their boredom and suffer no remorse even if people and property are harmed along the way (Derber 1996). While students reported a period in their lives where their reckless abandon entailed harming animals, this may have
been more of a cultural “time out” than a lasting sign of incivility or antisocial personality. Indeed, some groups, such as the Amish, anticipate and acknowledge these adolescent behaviors by permitting children between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one to leave home and experience what are regarded as unacceptable or immoral behaviors, only to return to the community morally intact despite their episodic waywardness during this “rumspringa” or “running around” period (Kraybill 2001).

Consistent with Fine’s argument, many but not all students presented themselves as morally troubled by their former abuse, although they did so in different ways. Some claimed to have experienced guilt at the time of their abuse, specifically naming this emotion in their talk. As one student said of his stoning to death a snake, “I felt like I tortured it and basically that I felt guilty. I started in on myself, like, how could I torture something? It made me question myself, like why would I do that? It wasn’t like I was in love with the snake. It’s not like I was going to cry over it being dead. But it just made me question myself, like what kind of person did this make me?” In the wake of his self-doubt, this student admonished himself for the abuse.

Other students claimed to feel guilty because they did not recall having this emotion years earlier when they harmed animals. The fact that they had been comfortable carried the implication that they were and are not decent people, and this implication haunted them. From their current perspective toward animals, not having had regret or guilt was hard for them to explain or to face. One student, for example, killed a friend’s hamster and was “freaked out” later because she was not upset at the time over killing the animal. She spoke of her continuing distress over not having had the appropriate feelings: “I started picking up my friend’s hamster and throwing it back in the cage. I was picking it up and throwing it in. I especially remember squeezing the hamster hard but not squeezing it as strong as I could. I wasn’t doing it intentionally to hurt it. Then I put it back in the cage and there was like a little bit of blood on the side of the cage. And then I went downstairs and I didn’t think anything of it. I didn’t even feel guilty about it. I wasn’t upset that the hamster was dead. I forgot about it for a while, but that kind of freaked me out later on. I am upset that I hadn’t been upset about it. I can’t believe I didn’t feel bad about it. That makes me feel bad now, because that’s not how I am. I mean, I’m a compassionate person.”
A few students conveyed their guilt more graphically by describing themselves as “killers” or “murderers” who lacked empathy for their victims. In this regard, one student spoke about how he could no longer shoot a possum as he did when he was fourteen because he now could identify with the needs of animals: “I just went out to kill something. But in my head, it is like what if it was going out to get food for babies and by me killing it, those babies died because there was no one to provide for them. If I went and killed a human being and people cared about it, I’d be a murderer. I feel like a murderer for killing an animal just because I had a gun in my hands and I felt like it.”

Further support for the idea that dirty play, such as animal abuse, can pay off positively came from the shame underlying students’ nervous laughter. For some, at one level such laughter may have been due to their feelings of uneasiness and nervousness because they could not make sense of prior acts. As one student said, “I laugh when I don’t understand something.” It also is possible that they laughed at the disconcerting image of themselves that emerged in the course of the interviews because of the sheer incongruity between their prior and current selves, at least in regard to their ability to harm animals. One student laughed as she noted about herself: “If I look at it right now, I just laugh because I’m like ‘why did I use to do it?’ I don’t understand why I used to do it. I just look at how I was then and how I am now. I wouldn’t do it now to a cat.”

Perhaps the laughter exhibited by students in this study is more akin to that witnessed during Milgram’s (1974) experiment on obedience to authority, when several students laughed as they inflicted what they thought were life-threatening punishments on the experiment’s confederates. Social scientists have speculated that this laughter may have served more as tension release than as a reflection of flippant disregard for suffering. Others have noted the value of black humor as a coping device for people to manage emotionally difficult situations, such as performing surgery, by making what can be a very serious situation into something that seems smaller or more normal (Koller 1988). Students’ laughter then, may be more of a reflection of their discomfort describing their former behavior than their disregard for animals.

These interpretations of laughter belie deeper emotions among students. The fact that some students laughed while also denying that their former acts were humorous spoke to this deeper understanding; it was
a different kind of laughter than that normally associated with the trivial or unimportant in that it was ironic or parenthetical. For example, as one student laughed, she pointed out that her former actions were not humorous: “I was so mean to them [cats]. It’s not funny right now, but looking back, how we used to treat them, it’s like ‘Wow, I used to do that!’” While Goffman (1967) claims that laughter can define a situation as unserious, the very fact that students attempted such a redefinition suggests that they recognized its potential seriousness. Students may have used this laughter as a dramaturgical signal to the interviewer that he or she no longer approved of such acts and was no longer capable of committing them, whether or not these assertions were true. The emotion they had trouble naming was a sense of disgrace in the presence of the interviewer. In this sense, their laughter may have been a marker or outer indicator of shame (Scheff 1990), further evidence for the sociological “payoff” of dirty play.

Some interviews, however, did not support Fine’s (1986) suggestion that as children mature their presentation of self will no longer define prior dirty play as fun. It is true that the students were late adolescents who might continue to mature into adulthood and develop sufficient guilt about their abuse to present a repentant self to others. Nevertheless, some still spoke about their former abuse as fun and showed little evidence of presenting themselves as ashamed or guilt-ridden for having harmed animals, even though they remembered thinking at the time that what they did was not quite right. A student illustrated this when he said, “I kind of realized that it was bad, like maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but then I’d think about how much fun it was.”

Many of these students thought animal abuse was a “normal” part of growing up and a reflection of childhood “innocence,” forgiving themselves and others for such acts. In this regard, some relied on a vocabulary of motives that dismissed their abuse as a “rite of passage.” This approach asserted that their prior behaviors were normal for children, and they no longer were children, having long stopped such play. From their perspective, animal cruelty was something that children do because they are children, or as one student said of his earlier act of throwing a cat through a basketball hoop: “We were young. We were kids. It was a stage for me.” Similarly, another student said: “It was just what most kids will go through. If you don’t torture a cat, you are going to torture some type of animal. It doesn’t matter how big or small.”
And yet another student described his abusing frogs some years earlier as just one of those things that “young guys do.” “When I was six or seven,” he said, ‘me and this kid, Henry, we would kill frogs. We would run them over with our bikes. We would totally abuse them, like fry them with a magnifying glass and like put fireworks in their mouths and everything. We’d just pick them up and destroy them. I never really loved doing it. I mean it was fun. We had nothing else to do. A lot of guys, when they’re young do things. . . . It stopped like in the fifth or sixth grade because I grew up. When you are young, you don’t really think of the social consequences to killing frogs. You know, you don’t think about the karma of it.”

There is good reason to think that this split in self-presentation, between those students who admonished themselves and those who still felt entitled to see their abuse as fun, is not due just to differences in students’ maturation, as Fine (1986) might explain. Students’ appropriation of the adult world had parallels in broader institutional and cultural themes about animals in American society that are equally confused about the proper treatment of animals. As a form of deep play (Chick and Donlon 1992; Fine 1988, 1992), animal abuse allowed students to discover these themes and connect them to their everyday behavior. By drawing on these themes, students could reflect on their abuse—planning it, carrying it out, and concealing it—and tell conflicting stories about harming animals that supported alternative presentations of self. They could talk, on one hand, about how disturbed they were about their former abuse and on the other hand, how entertaining they still considered it to be. They could tie their abuse, along with their reputed compassion and kindness toward animals, to a larger society that is confused about how we regard the moral status of nonhuman animals.

Our ability to switch from treating animals as objects than can be abused one moment to treating them as members of the family that are adored the next has been widely documented in many American institutions and customs. Biomedical scientists, for example, typically tout their love and admiration for animals, especially their own pets, while carrying out experiments on animals of the same species (Arluke 1988). And school programs in biology dissection have a hidden curriculum that teaches young people how to construct and effortlessly shift between categories that objectify animals in certain situations while
personalizing them in others (e.g., Arluke and Hafferty 1996; Solot and Arluke 1997). When they remembered their abuse as fun, students might selectively tune out media attention given to extraordinary acts of altruism by humans to save endangered animals and instead hone in on slapstick portrayals of animal suffering common in mainstream popular culture (Melson 2001). Such humorous slants on cruelty are built into a social order that makes light of animals being harmed or even killed (Gerbner 1995). For example, the media industry is guilty of using cruelty to get laughs. Movie viewers snicker as Jack Nicholson, in As Good as It Gets, decides to dispose of his neighbor’s yapping dog by throwing it down a garbage shoot. And in There’s Something About Mary the audience roars as a dog is thrown through the air. Radio, too, is not immune to joking about animal cruelty. The former Boston talk show Two Chicks Dishin’ devoted two programs to listeners who called in “tales of childhood animal torture.” The hosts engineered the show to have a light and humorous tone and admonished callers who did not find the discussion funny. And certainly books do not spare making a good joke out of cruelty, using humor to cloak our ambivalence toward animals. Cats, for one, are viewed with ambivalence. The September 21, 1981, issue of Time reports that a book entitled 101 Uses for a Dead Cat sold 600,000 copies in just a few months and that there were 575,000 copies in print of The Second Official I Hate Cats Book, which followed the earlier I Hate Cats Book. Twenty years later saw the release of I Still Hate Cats and the I Hate Cats Calendar. There are even Web sites that feature ingenious devices to torture animals, all in the name of “good fun,” such as “bonsai cat” sites that show how to force kittens into bottles. Similarly, when students recalled their abuse as “something normal,” they also could selectively ignore media stories about unusual human kindness to animals and focus on instances in popular culture where extreme mistreatment of animals goes unpunished. Such abuse is often used as a literary device to construct character. For example, in the play Rent, although a landlord throws a dog out of a window to punish renters who fail to pay him, he suffers no incrimination or penalty for doing so. Also, in the movie Straw Dogs, Dustin Hoffman is not distressed that his girlfriend’s cat has been hanged to death by a group of handymen who killed the animal to show the couple that they are unsafe and that no part of their home is off limits. The men unnerve
Hoffman more than their act of cruelty, which he does not protest, despite appeals from his girlfriend to confront the men about their abuse. Some instances of unpunished brutality are used for their shock value but still convey the message that hurting animals is no crime. In one story about the now staid and mainstream rocker Ozzy Osbourne, we are reminded that years ago the legendary bat-biting singer committed a “sick act of animal cruelty” by “slaughtering” with a shotgun the family’s seventeen cats (*National Inquirer* 2002). Similarly, *Hell on Earth*, an industrial rock band from Tampa, Florida, received national attention when the group allowed a chronically ill and depressed person to commit suicide on stage during one of its concerts. Readers were reminded, as an afterthought, that the band had a history of doing unusual things during concerts, including grinding up rats in blenders.

That students could experience animal abuse as deep play illustrates how children appropriate information from adult culture and creatively use it to address their own concerns. Virtually all of their appropriation of adult culture had parallels in our wider society. For example, when students borrowed the adult facility of drawing boundaries between human groups, their talk of harming victims because they were “simply” animals, “only” strays, or “just” other people’s pets” closely paralleled our cultural typifications of animals that legitimate their inconsistent and dismissive treatment. Permeating adult thinking and action toward animals in many western societies is a sociozoological scale that specifies our conceptions of the moral relationships between humans and nonhuman animals (Arluke and Sanders 1996). The less some animal is regarded as “like us,” the more we will tolerate, ignore, or even condone its mistreatment. Certainly, the deep play of animal abuse was not limited to the ability of students to couch their acts in the sociozoological scale. For example, when students borrowed and used information about common adult rituals and occupations, their talk about the fun of “hunting” or “experimenting” closely paralleled how adults in the United States treat animals in harmful ways that are sanctioned by customs and legitimized through institutions.

In the end, then, what students derived from dirty play with animals was far more profound and complicated than the control and empowerment realized through their appropriation of certain features of adult culture, although that alone is no small accomplishment. Since dirty play is a reflection of, rather than separate from, the values of society
(Fine 1991), its identity-conferring properties, in the case of animal abuse, will mirror our conflicted attitudes about animals. When students reflected on and grappled with what their animal abuse said about them, the stories that they told themselves about themselves were no more or no less contradictory than those writ large across our society’s ambiguous and shifting canvas of human-animal relationships. Much like Clifford’s (1992, 100) rethinking of culture, the adult world that students creatively borrow from, refashion, and apply to their own mundane activities is a “multiply authored invention, a historical formation, an enactment, a political construct, a shifting paradox, an ongoing translation, an emblem, a trademark, a consensual negotiation of contrastive identity, and more.” Students’ identities are formed from the multiple and contradictory layers of society, making it possible for them to present themselves as young adults now deeply disturbed by their prior acts or still entertained by them.