Origin of Adult Animal Rights Lifestyle in Childhood Responsiveness to Animal Suffering

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Abstract
This qualitative study examines the childhood experiences of adult animal rights activists regarding their feelings about, and interactions with, nonhuman animals. Central to children's experiences with animals is the act of eating them, a ritual both normalized and encouraged by the dominant culture and agents of socialization. Yet, despite the massive power of socialization, sometimes children resist the dominant norms of consumption regarding animals. In addition to engaging in acts of resistance, some children, as suggested in the biographical narratives of adult vegan animal activists, also possess a predisposition to respond to the perceived suffering of animals. This predisposition is a variant of the trait empathy but is specifically animal-oriented. In open-ended interviews with 30 vegan animal activists about their paths into the movement, this study examined these childhood experiences and the predisposition that may help set the stage for later adoption of a vegan, animal-rights lifestyle.

Keywords
animal activists; animal rights; children; dominant culture; empathy; resistance; socialization; veganism

Introduction

Many young children are totally oblivious to the conventional moral distinction between humans and all other living creatures… To my son, saving tigers, gorillas, and other endangered species is still as pressing as saving human lives… he clearly has not learned yet how to curb his moral attention in a socially appropriate manner (Zerubavel, 1997, p. 47).

It is true that a salient function of childhood socialization is to curb moral attention where nonhuman animals are concerned, and an important component of the socialization process is the normative channeling of empathy
(Myers, 1998; Plous, 1993). How then do individuals come to identify with, and participate in, the animal rights movement? Animal rights ideology is antithetical to normal patterns of socialization in many ways and, concomitantly, to the dominant cultural ideology regarding animals; the majority of people, including animal rights activists, are not raised in vegetarian or vegan households. From a sociological perspective, eating animals is supposed to be internalized as a “normal” practice. Given the centrality of food rituals to a culture (Harris, 1974), this is an important aspect of socialization; however, it does not always “stick.” Why not? Why does this pattern of socialization come “undone” or not work properly with certain individuals?

Adoption of an animal rights perspective and vegan lifestyle—often a lengthy process that takes place over a number of years—can be conceptualized as a form of secondary socialization, which results in significant identity transformation (Pallotta, 2005). Major lifestyle changes accompany this process, as budding activists struggle to achieve consistency between their ideals and their actions (Herzog, 1993; McDonald, 2000; Pallotta). Some have compared adoption of an animal rights lifestyle to religious conversion because of the paradigm shift that accompanies changing one’s fundamental beliefs regarding human-nonhuman animal relationships (Herzog; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). In addition, this “conversion” often has a significant impact on current social relationships (Pallotta). However, primary, or childhood, socialization regarding humanity’s relationships with other animals is an important process that precedes, frames, and gives meaning to adult animal activism in significant ways. Childhood socialization provides both the foundation for conformity to dominant ideals about human-animal relationships and the seeds of dissent and resistance.

Socialization and Cultural Confusion

A paradox exists in the fact that childhood socialization both encourages and squashes children’s sympathy for animals in different ways. Socialization nurtures the expression of sympathy toward animals; yet, it also channels and dilutes this sympathy in powerful ways (Plous 1993). These two contrary functions are indicators of a larger cultural ambivalence toward nonhuman animals (Serpel I, 1986, Arluke & Sanders, 1996, Francione, 2000). This ambivalence is manifest most sharply in the differential treatment of animals based upon species, and the cultural categories to which different species have been relegated in human society, for example “food,” “companion,” “research tool,” or “wildlife.” This ambivalence is portrayed in a poster created by FARM, a national farmed-animal advocacy group. The poster displays a photograph of a puppy and a piglet nose-to-nose with the text, “Which do you pet and which
do you eat? Why?” A bumper sticker produced by Farm Sanctuary, also a farmed-animal advocacy group, poses the question: “If you love animals called pets . . . why do you eat animals called dinner?”

These questions are sensible only to the extent that “members of contemporary societies classify animals not only [on] biological grounds, but on moral and social ones as well” (Arluke & Sanders, p. 168, 1996). As Zerubavel (1997) states in the quotation that opens this article, many young children are oblivious to the moral distinctions not only among different species of animals but also between all humans on the one hand and all other animals on the other. These moral distinctions are learned during the socialization process, although competing socializing influences with regard to the place of nonhuman animals in society do exist, and at times give rise to ambivalence.

Although any residual ambivalence regarding our relationship to nonhuman animals should be theoretically resolved by the time one reaches adulthood (as is evident by the fact that approximately 97% of Americans eat meat [The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2007]), the transmission of dominant norms regarding nonhuman animals is not always smooth. Culture is indeed powerful however, and children are not merely passive receptacles of socialization. Despite lacking the social power of adults, children still bring their own agency to bear on the socialization process, and formulate their own ideas about the human-nonhuman animal relationship.

Methods

This study examines the retrospective accounts of adult, vegan, animal-rights activists regarding the roots of their concern for animals. This analysis is based on 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with activists, which focused on reconstructing their paths into the movement. This narrative reconstruction was elicited by asking them how and when they first became aware of animal rights issues, when and why they first became vegetarian and then vegan, and how they came to be “activists”—that is, actively involved in one or more movement organization and devoting significant personal resources to the cause above and beyond lifestyle changes. The format of the interviews was a focused biography, and the effects of the often-dramatic transition from meat-eater to vegan were considered, as was the impact of this identity and lifestyle shift on the personal relationships and social lives of activists. My criteria for participation were that the interviewee be both vegan and an active member of a grassroots or national animal rights organization. Length of active participation varied. Of the 30 interviewees, 14 were women and 16 were men. The youngest activist in my sample was 18 years old and the oldest activist was
The data presented here are part of a larger study examining the process of becoming an animal rights activist (Pallotta, 2005). During interviews, respondents were asked to recall—if they could—their very first memories of feeling concern for animals and/or of acting on this concern. The relatively young age at which a majority of respondents reported feeling concern for animals or animal suffering was noteworthy. I did not set out to include childhood experiences in my study of activists’ paths into the movement, but it quickly became apparent that this is where many activists located the roots of their concern for animals and interest in vegetarianism. These concerns most often were expressed as not wanting to eat animals, but they also took the form of rescuing (or trying to rescue) specific animals and feelings of guilt and sadness.

Empathic Predisposition: Childhood Responsiveness to Animal Suffering

Incidents involving responsiveness to the perceived suffering of animals were easily recalled by respondents when I asked them to think back to the first
time they could remember feeling concern for animals and their well-being. Twenty-seven out of 30 respondents (90%) recalled a youthful (aged 14 and younger) responsiveness to animal suffering, which was manifest in 1 of 3 ways. These incidents took the form of

1. meat resistance;
2. “saving” or rescuing specific animals; or
3. feelings of guilt or sadness over an animal being harmed.

Of the 30 respondents, 18 (60%) experienced meat resistance, 5 (17%) recalled trying to rescue animals perceived to be in harm’s way, and 19 (63%) remembered feeling guilt or sadness over an animal being harmed.

Fifteen respondents (50%) displayed one of these elements of responsiveness to animal suffering; 10 (33%) displayed 2 elements, and 2 respondents (6%) displayed all 3 of the above. To avoid overlap, I only coded memories separately as category 3, “feelings of guilt and sadness,” when they did not involve meat resistance; otherwise the numbers of respondents displaying multiple forms would be higher, since most experiences of meat resistance (category 1) also included negative emotions such as those described in category (3).

The category meat resistance includes adults who expressed a desire to abstain from eating meat during childhood. Usually this resistance resulted from a trigger experience or epiphany, whereby the child consciously realized for the first time meat came from animals and was profoundly disturbed by this fact. Feelings of empathy with nonhuman animals that—from a sociological perspective—are stimulated by imaginatively taking the role of the animal-other (Mead, 1934/1962), can be a major catalyst for a childhood meat epiphany. In an illustrative example of boundary blurring, which is common in instances of trans-species empathy, 5-year-old Kate realized the chicken bone she was holding in her hand was qualitatively similar to the bones inside her own body. Kate was one of the youngest in my sample to go vegetarian. She declared her intention to be vegetarian at 10 years old and had made the complete transition by age 12. Her parents were very supportive and went vegetarian themselves a few years after she did.

KATE: . . . We had show and tell and I remember having eaten a chicken drumstick or something at home, and you get down to the bone—I realized that it was a bone. It was a bone like a bone in me, or you, or anybody else. And it really sort of tripped me out that this was somebody’s appendage and I had their bone in my hand. So I took it to show-and-tell because I thought everyone else would be equally amazed by that, but I don’t think anybody really was.
Kate felt disgust at the thought of eating another creature so seemingly anatomically similar to herself. The relevant characteristic in this comparison is the focus on similarity rather than perceived differences between chickens and humans.

Another similar type of meat epiphany occurs when an explicit connection is made between the meat one is eating and the animal from whom it came. Here the relevant cognitive connection is between the meat and the (formerly) living animal, rather than between animal and human body. Needless to say, it is not the connection per se that is significant in these cases, but rather the disturbing feelings and negative emotions that surface as a result of this connection. Nora also had this type of meat epiphany as a pre-teen; she did not recall her exact age when this happened, only that she was “definitely under ten.” Although she did not go vegetarian at that moment—she still “kind of ate meat and didn’t really think about it”—she did become a vegetarian in high school.

NORA: I was at a horse show, and I was sitting there on my horse waiting for my class to come up, and I was eating a hamburger and there was this baby cow tied up to a fence next to me and I was sitting there eating that hamburger, and I just kind of looked over, oh, how cute—then I was like: Aaah! What am I eating?!... It just clicked.

Alison also cognitively linked a specific, live chicken to the generic “chicken” she had been eating.

ALISON: ... my dad brought home a little brown hen for Easter one day... And somehow the connection... it wasn't an exact concrete moment, but it was just the time of getting the hen and then all of a sudden I couldn't eat chicken.

Heather’s childhood meat epiphany was triggered by a cognitive link made while visiting her relatives’ farm. Although Heather did not want to eat the meat being served, her mother became angry and told her it was rude not to eat what she had been served and that people “think differently about animals on farms.” Although Heather refused to eat meat on that particular day, the resistance of her parents was successful in squelching her budding interest in vegetarianism, as it was not until much later, during college, that she adopted a completely vegetarian diet. Nevertheless, when asked, she easily recalls her initial, and ultimately short-lived, resistance to meat as well as what triggered it:
HEATHER: My first experience with vegetarianism was feeding my uncle’s pigs over the summertime. We spent the summer at an uncle and aunt’s farm and I would feed them the table scraps and when we were back for vacation they said, ‘oh, that’s Watermelon [one of the pigs] that we’re eating.’ And that was like the big click for me . . . that was like the first time I realized, oh my god! And I was really upset about Watermelon at that point, but it still took me a couple more years to make the click of all of them being pigs.

Tara also recalled a strong resistance to meat at a very young age but, like Heather, her nascent vegetarianism did not resurface until much later in life, when she was in her late 20s. Although parental pressure was responsible for Tara not acting on her impulse to avoid meat as a 6-year-old, once she was in a position to do so, as an autonomous adult, she did not. She attributes this long latency period (between the time when the feelings of meat resistance first surfaced and her acting on these feelings) to the power of socialization and cultural conditioning.

After childhood socialization, dominant social norms become internalized to a certain extent; hence less coercive means of social control are necessary. In other words, as the generalized other, or society, takes the place of significant others as the major locus of social control, people learn to want to conform. At six years old, however, Tara vividly remembers trying to resist meat.

TARA: All I remember is that I did not want to eat meat when I was growing up. As soon as I found out that animals were meat I was really upset and I told my mother I didn’t want to eat animals and she said—you know, she insisted—that I had to, and that’s just the way it was, and there was no getting around it. I mean she was not even for a second going to consider that I wouldn’t eat that. So I kind of gave it up. I gave up fighting about it.

The feeling that her parents had betrayed her by obscuring the origins of meat exacerbated Tara’s initial shock. But the weight of socialization proved impossible for her childhood self to resist and her vegetarian impulse was repressed for almost 20 years.

TARA: . . . someone said, ‘You know meat is made out of animals’ and I said, ‘No it isn’t’ and they said, ‘Yes, hamburgers are cows’ and they started telling me all this stuff, this older kid, and I said, ‘No way.’ And they said, ‘Yeah go ask your parents.’ And so I did and they said, ‘Yeah.’ And then I was really mad. I was mad at them for not telling me. And mad at them for telling me I had to eat it. But then I just went through my life and never thought about it again. In fact, even when I was in a position when I could have stopped eating meat, it was so ingrained in me this is what I had to do—what I was supposed to do. But I didn't think about it again for a long time...
Two respondents did not actively resist meat as young children but recalled milder feelings of vague revulsion, or misgivings and uneasiness about the origins of meat. But in these cases, the experience was not as strong as those described above, and did not result in them deciding to become vegetarian at the time (although both were vegetarians by age 14). Looking back from the vantage point of an adult identity consistent with an animal rights lifestyle, such uneasiness becomes meaningful, whereas at the time, it would have lacked context. These feelings of misgiving indicate a discomfort with meat that is at that moment unarticulated, lacking sufficient reinforcement from alternative cultural influences, as the child is still ensconced in a world of meat without counter definitions of reality to draw upon. Like Kate above, Simon’s early experience involved the blurring of species boundaries as he compares the veins in meat with the veins in his own arm.

SIMON: When I was growing up I had that, what I thought was a pretty normal revulsion to meat. Well, not revulsion—that’s too strong—but cutting open roast beef or something when I was eating it, I remember images of seeing veins in the meat and just realizing that this, you know, looking at the veins in my arms and then realizing that it was another creature that I was eating. And so that bothered me a little bit but I never took that any further.

Simon became a vegetarian eventually at 14 years old after reading animal rights philosopher Singer’s (2002) classic. Despite his “sneaking suspicions” that eating meat was wrong, Evan believes that, in the absence of visible options and cultural alternatives, the strength of socialization carries the day, especially for young people.

EVAN: I think it was always sneaking suspicions in my head of what am I eating?… I think I always had lingering thoughts of this is an animal… But I never connected it with oh I can do something about it. And I feel like that’s a pretty common thing among people I know who are vegetarian or vegans now. It’s like you always had a feeling that something there was wrong with what you were doing, but you can’t express it, you don’t know what to do about it… and it’s not until someone presents an option to you that you actually feel like you’re empowered to do something.

The “appropriate” channeling and funneling of empathy is undoubtedly one of the more important functions of socialization. The power of this type of socialization is demonstrated by the fact that very few children go vegetarian when they have childhood meat resistance experiences, which by all accounts are not uncommon (Amato and Partridge, 1989).
Resistance to meat is just one way that the responsiveness to animal suffering trait is expressed. The other two aspects are rescuing animals and experiencing emotions of guilt or sadness over animals being harmed.

**Rescuing Animals**

Sometimes responsiveness to animal suffering is manifest through a youthful impulse to rescue animals or protect them from harm, as in the case of Heather, who describes instances from her childhood in which she attempted to rescue animals from bad situations.

HEATHER: . . . the school would always have the mice that they were going to kill at the end of the year and I’d always take them home . . . I’d hide them under my bed . . . And the earliest I can remember is we used to go to the circus and they would sell chameleons . . . they had little collars on attached to a leash and then they were all pinned to a board and they would sell them to people to pin on their shirts and I remember being so horrified and my activism at that time was saving up my allowance and buying as many of them as I could so that they could come home and live a normal life rather than being pinned to somebody’s shirt.

Heather was also known as the “animal lover” on her block as a child, and recalls people in the neighborhood would bring her baby birds that fell out of their nests. Nicholas also had a rescue impulse, expressed as a ten-year-old when he stood up to his friends over an incident of animal cruelty.

NICHOLAS: I got in trouble with the other kids one time because they were all smashing the toads with rocks and I kind of just flipped and I threw a big rock in the water and got them all wet and then I ran away and teased them . . . And so they started throwing rocks at me . . . It kind of made me the outcast . . . I didn’t make the whole connection with what I was eating, but I did feel that connection that you shouldn’t just kill them for nothing . . . that was probably the first time that I stood up for the animals in some way . . .

The following recollection by Alison is noteworthy not only because it indicates a rather strong rescue impulse, but also because it involves “bugs,” a category of animal that garners even less sympathy than fish do in American culture, not to mention mammals or birds. These incidents surprise her today because she, like most Americans, is not particularly fond of “bugs.”

ALISON: I also remember walking to the bus stop and pill bugs being on the ground like upside down and having to stop and turn every pill bug over . . . they get turned over and I guess they can’t get up because I would see them struggling so I would have
to turn every one over and I would miss the bus and stuff for school because I was so like obsessed with turning over the pill bugs... When I went to the snow, the first family vacation, there were these lady bugs on a tree, covering a tree but a lot of them had fallen off into the snow and I had to pick them all up put them back on the tree because I thought they were all freezing in the snow... I had to spend hours netting the bugs out of the pool too... I remember thinking, oh god it's never going to end. There's so many bugs in here. I can't possibly get them all out [laughing].

The examples in this category are consistent with what Arluke (2003) has identified as “super-nurturance” in his study of the social psychological factors associated with the humane tendencies of certain children.

**Feelings of Guilt and Sadness**

This category contains incidents that are perhaps less specific than those in the other two categories; however, sensitivity to animal suffering revealed itself in ways other than resistance to meat and impulses to rescue animals from harmful situations. Sometimes loosely related events evoked feelings of sadness or guilt, which seemed to indicate the presence of the “responsiveness to animal suffering” trait. Joe’s misgivings about hurting animals were partially evinced in his refusal to dissect in sixth grade.

JOE: ... I think in the 6th grade I knew that I was going to be a vegetarian. I just loved animals. I hated the unit in my Spanish class on bullfighting. I refused to dissect in the classroom at the time. I was still so young that I wasn't empowered enough to totally not even attend that class but I wouldn't touch the animal... But it wasn't until in 6th grade, I wrote this poetry book for English class and it was all about cows and my favorite poem was a haiku entitled, Cruelty. And it says, “Cows are very neat. They have horns and ears and feet. Chop. Chop. Now they're meat.”

Simon and Scott both had negative BB gun experiences when they were boys that involved shooting animals and then feeling guilty afterward over their actions.

SIMON: ... When I was growing up, for Christmas, I must have been nine years old or something like that, and I got a BB gun... and I got bored with shooting at cans and there was a little chipmunk sitting on the woodpile and it was eating an acorn... and for some reason I pulled the trigger. And I didn't pump it up hard enough to kill the chipmunk, but I shot him and the BB hit him right in between the eyes... and it just hit him [laughing] and he dropped the acorn and like rubbed his nose like this [demonstrates] and ran away.
NP: Was your intent to kill him?
SIMON: No! I didn't know what I was going to do. I just unthinkingly did it and I felt so guilty, I felt so awful, because... if I killed it, maybe I wouldn't have felt any-
thing because it was dead, but when I shot it I saw it react and rub its nose and run away.

Scott had a similar negative experience, except in his case he actually killed the animal in question.

SCOTT: ... Before that was the incident when I got my BB gun, which I had wanted for a long time, and my brother would go out and shoot birds and whatever. And I really wanted a BB gun, and I saved up and finally got my BB gun and went out with my brother and the first bird I shot at I hit. I ran over and it really struck me. And I looked down and there was a bird and the bird was dead on the ground and I felt really bad and ... it made me really sad, and I didn't want to shoot any more birds. And I never shot that BB gun again ... that was it.

It is not only BB gun incidents that provoke feelings of guilt or sadness; real hunting can do the same thing. Stan grew up in a hunting family, and his family operated an animal farm with a slaughterhouse on the premises. Growing up, he assisted with the process of butchering animals. This never bothered him as a child and he did not go vegetarian until he was 28 years old. However, he did experience a negative emotional reaction the first time he shot and killed a deer. Although this incident obviously had an impact on him, and he readily recalls it almost twenty years later, he continued to hunt afterwards.

STAN: I remember the first deer that I killed. I shot a doe when I was 12 years old ... I get pretty emotional if I talk about it ... my father wanted me to get a deer. And one came out and I shot it and it just dropped and it was this really horrible experience. I was shaking after I did it ... and my father and his friends came. I was basically applauded and congratulated and the feelings I had, I guess they passed or were hidden I guess maybe ... then I shot other, hunted rabbits and birds and all those things.

It is probable that competing socialization influences, especially expectations conveyed through male role models regarding masculinity and hunting, were stronger and helped push his easy responsiveness to animal suffering into a latency period. However, he had stopped hunting by the time he was in college. Amber's early memory involves an ant; in our interview she said it was the first time she remembers feeling compassion.

AMBER: So I was six years old, I was in my room with one of my friends and there was this ant on the ground and we were like, 'Oh no! It's an ant! Oh!' We were really scared and we called my dad and we were like, 'Kill it!' ... And so he comes in with his big boot and he stumps on it ... And then I remember after my friend left I just started bawling because I felt so horrible ... it was just an ant but I felt so bad. And I felt so
mean... It hit me afterwards, like, why did I need to do that? And I remember that so vividly because I just spent the rest of the day moping...

Discussion: Empathy, Socialization, and Resistance

The capacity for empathy, though shaped and molded by socialization, is hard-wired into human beings. While “hard-wired” is not a phrase often used by social constructionists, the centrality of empathy was imported into sociological social psychology by students of Mead (1934/1962) more than 60 years ago. As Mead pointed out, the development of the self is impossible in the absence of social interaction, and successful social interaction depends upon taking the role of the other. Mead believed that humans are unique in their capacity for role taking and in their ability to imaginatively assume the perspective of another person or, in the case of the generalized other, a whole community of “others.” This ability to take the role of the other relies upon a highly developed sense of empathy, in that each social actor must mentally assume the position of others in order to imagine what they are thinking and feeling to anticipate their response. The responsiveness to animal suffering displayed by my respondents indicates a variant of empathy that is animal-oriented. As Paul (2000) found, empathy for animals and empathy for humans are correlated—but only modestly so. While both are variants of empathy, animal-oriented empathy should be researched as a separate phenomenon. A signature feature of this type of empathy is its boundary-blurring nature. Often the perception of the species-boundary is thin or non-existent, in that the child does not recognize or acknowledge the culturally created separations between categories that justify differential treatment of creatures that children may consider their peers, confederates, or potential friends rather than resources, objects, or commodities, as they usually come to be defined through normal socialization.

Animal-oriented empathy is a kind of sympathetic empathy, an emotional response that entails mental projection into another’s situation and vicariously feeling what that person would, as if it were happening directly to you. Empathy does not necessarily lead to sympathy (de Waal, 1996); for instance, empathy can lead to Schadenfreude, which is the direct opposite of sympathy, in other words, taking pleasure in another’s pain or discomfort. Hence, the very same ability can lead to a different and opposite response.

However, empathy may lead to sympathy if combined with caring (de Waal, 1996, p. 85). It is the connection that participants in this study feel with animals that leads their empathy to take the form of sympathy. De Waal writes,
Identifying with and caring about another without losing one’s own identity is the crux of human sympathy. This requires certain cognitive abilities, the most important one being a well-developed sense of self and the ability to assume another individual’s perspective” (p. 82).

As Mead (1934/1962) argued, role taking is essential for the development of the social self. As noted, Mead was writing specifically about human social actors taking the role of other human social actors. When role taking involves taking the role of the “animal other,” however, sympathetic empathy rooted in identification and caring may occur, as the individual perspective taken is that of a nonhuman animal.

In the interviews, the exercise of animal-oriented sympathetic empathy was seen not only in childhood recollections but also in experiences of adulthood. It was not uncommon for respondents to report feeling physical or mental anguish when imagining situations of cruelty or suffering, as in this quote by Violet, “The thought of an animal being hurt is just—it’s very painful for me. I can feel it almost.” Sympathetic empathy can be a particularly strong response that is not easily suppressed. Once knowledge is gained about animal suffering, through videos, books, pamphlets, and other materials, it can be difficult for those prone to feelings of sympathetic empathy to “turn it off.” When this happens, a flood of unwelcome images may haunt the person, the common element being the imagined suffering of the animal, which causes a pain response in the person imagining the scene. A key characteristic of sympathetic empathy is minimal detachment between self and other, so these mental images can be profoundly painful.

FRED: The images don’t go away, the images of animals being slaughtered, or trapped in a fur farm… the most disturbing thing to me is pictures of animals in cages just spinning around because they’re insane, and have nowhere to go, totally divorced from their natural order and their natural lives. It’s maddening to watch, and that is just sheer and utter pain. And to be able to empathize with that is—I mean, I’m grateful for it, but it’s awful to live with at the same time.

Considering the potential downside of sympathetic empathy, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why processes of socialization and enculturation work to erect boundaries, at times quite zealously, around this emotion. Yet, neither sensitivity nor empathy for animals in childhood is a rare phenomenon (Myers, 1998). Children are encouraged to love and identify with animals through just about every outpost of children’s culture—including toys, games, stories, and movies, and even through the presence of actual animals in the form of companion animals. The saturation of children’s culture with animals is well
documented (Melson, 2001, Myers). According to the accounts of participants in this study, the main impetus behind their youthful resistance to eating meat was that they had—in most cases—come to define animals as “other-than-food.” Questions of the biological roots of empathy aside, it seems reasonable to conclude that this counter-definition was at least partially the result of competing socializing influences, some of which encourage children to identify and empathize with animals rather than to view them as utilitarian objects.

However, through normal socialization, children learn to place boundaries between themselves and all other animals—as well as between different species of animals—in terms of norms, emotions, and moral treatment. Part of the social experience of growing up is acquiring an “adult” attitude toward animals, which includes adopting a utilitarian orientation toward them (Johnson, 1996). Emotions such as empathy are channeled “appropriately” toward our own species and species deemed more “like us” in some way: dogs who, in many cases, share our homes; chimpanzees, who share much of our DNA; and, in some cases, certain categories of people such as our own race, ethnicity, or religion.12

Because empathy involves mentally putting ourselves in the place of another, that we tend to feel more sympathy for those perceived to be more “like us” is not surprising and is supported by numerous psychological studies that refer to this phenomenon as “the similarity principle” (Plous, 1993). Hence, people with backgrounds (or physical appearances) similar to our own can be expected to elicit more empathy than those who seem different as will, expanding outward now, members of our own species and—expanding even further outward—those species perceived to be more like us. The similarity principle is expressed in the tendency for people to feel more sympathy for mammals than for fish and birds. The potential transferability of the similarity principle, which has traditionally been applied to human-human relations, is borne out by studies that suggest it may also be applied to human-animal relations (Rajecki, Rasmussen, and Craft, 1993; Plous, 1993). Competing social constructions that suggest animals are more similar to humans than different inexorably nudge the similarity principle into new terrain.

Children’s Culture and Animals: Competing Social Constructions

Although most adults have developed ways to deal with potential dissonance regarding inconsistency in our attitudes toward animals, children, being not yet fully socialized and having less developed defenses, may be more vulnerable to this discomfort—especially that which accompanies the inevitable
realization that meat comes from animals. However, childhood socialization works to minimize potential conflict in a number of ways. Although American children are taught both to love and to consume animals, “conflict between these practices is avoided in part by de-emphasizing consumed animals as objects of affection,” (Plous, 1993, p. 21). Plous points out that cows, pigs, and chickens are represented much less frequently among stuffed animal toys than are other kinds of animals. Besides de-emphasizing consumed animals as objects of affection, conflict is deflected in additional ways, including “socializing children to believe that meat is necessary for adequate nutrition and that meat comes from happy farm animals who live in idyllic settings” (Plous, p. 21).

On the other hand, children’s movies often feature talking-animal protagonists who engender sympathy in the audience. This elicitation of a sympathetic response especially contradicts the dominant ideology when the protagonist is a farmed animal, as in the case of the popular movies *Babe* and *Babe: Pig in the City*—which have been criticized for confusing children about the proper place of pigs in society; that is, as a source of bacon, pork chops, and barbeque (Pearson, 1998). While these movies have been denounced by some because they encourage identification with farmed animals and hence create cognitive dissonance by sending children contradictory messages about whether pigs are “friends” or “food,”13 the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)—in an effort to capitalize on its phenomenal box-office success—incorporated the movie *Babe* into a vegetarian campaign featuring the slogan, “Please Don’t Eat Babe for Breakfast.”

Children’s realistic animal stories, too, stimulate empathy with animals through the use of a number of literary conventions typical of the genre; for example, stories often tell the story from the animal’s point of view, which encourages the reader to imaginatively assume the perspective of, and hence sympathize with, the animal (Johnson, 1996). These elements of American children’s culture represent counter-definitions of reality regarding the human-animal relationship, whereby the animal is transformed metaphorically from an object to a subject. These counter-definitions are also supported by the increase in both the presence of companion animals in American homes14 and the number of people who cite companionship and affection as the main reasons for having a companion animal (Sanders, 1999). Companion animals are increasingly perceived as subjects-in-interaction with whom one is thought to share a genuine relationship and an emotional bond. As noted by Pearson (1998), the critic of *Babe*, this social construction is unproblematic to the extent that we do not eat dogs and cats.

Hence, while it may not be rare for children to identify with animals to the point of not wanting to eat them, my research suggests that it is much less
common for parents to indulge their child’s wish to not eat animals. Meat resistance in children articulates that which is hidden in our postmodern industrial society: the treatment of farmed animals. Although adults have at their disposal several psychological mechanisms\textsuperscript{15} to minimize the cognitive dissonance that may arise between their self conception as a compassionate person and the unsavory facts surrounding the modern factory farming industry, in which animals are treated more like machines than living creatures (Singer, 2002; Scully, 2002; Eisein, 1997; Finsen & Finsen, 1994; Mason, 1990). Children have not yet internalized these psychological mechanisms and may make the adults around them uncomfortable by openly questioning the practice of eating animals.

As opposed to general humane behavior, which was supported and encouraged by the parents of super-nurturing children in Arluke’s (2003) study, refusal to eat meat is less normative and hence more likely to be met with parental disapproval. Although American culture ostensibly values the humane treatment of animals, farmed animals are not included in the general admonition against animal cruelty or protected by most anti-cruelty laws. While it is not threatening to the dominant ideology to encourage kindness to dogs and cats and even wild animals, kindness to farmed animals would logically result in not eating them, which has important implications for society and the economy.

\textbf{Conclusion}

While future studies might focus on parental attitudes toward fledgling vegetarianism in their children, the primary significance of the retrospective accounts here lies in how they inform our understanding of the deep cultural contradictions regarding the human-animal relationship, which are especially salient in childhood, and how these contradictions encourage the expression of empathy. Currently, most children are gradually socialized out of a predisposition toward universal empathy, of which animal-oriented empathy is a variant—Paul’s (2000) research suggests this. Cultural trends that heighten contradictions should make it more likely that this trait will find support in the dominant culture, including within parental socialization.

Despite the fact that ethical vegetarians and vegans comprise a tiny percentage (about 3% combined)\textsuperscript{16} of the overall population, there is reason to think that the competing socializing influences with regard to animals and children will increase, in turn militating against the effects of socialization to decrease animal-oriented empathy. The cultural contradictions inherent in our relationships with animals show no signs of resolving. These contradictions may be intensifying, considering trends like
1. humane education in schools, in part due to increased recognition of “the link” between animal abuse and violence against humans (Lockwood & Ascione, 1998);
2. minor reforms regarding farmed-animal welfare standards (Kaufman, 2007); and
3. incremental but steady developments in the field of law regarding the strict definition of animals as property (Gillette & Tischler, 2007).

The animal rights movement has also become a more visible part of popular and political culture in the last decade, which means more people will become aware of animal issues. In addition, because farmed animals comprise the greatest number of animals killed each year, many animal protection groups have begun to focus their campaigns on promoting veganism: This new focus has brought greater attention to issues of consumption. Finally, in the last several years, it has become easier to obtain vegan staples like soymilk, veggie burgers, and non-dairy margarine in mainstream grocery stores. The increasing availability of these products renders veganism a more visible and less daunting option than it was even 10 years ago, despite the fact that U.S. meat consumption per capita has increased in that same time (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007). These developments, taken as a whole, suggest that the cultural thrust is toward encouraging empathy with animals, thus making it easier for individuals with a predisposition toward animal-oriented empathy to adopt pro-animal rights lifestyle and put this empathy into action.

Given the increasing visibility of alternative constructions regarding the human-animal relationship, childhood responsiveness to animal suffering should theoretically become more common. Although the number of vegetarians is still relatively few, and vegans even fewer, there is certainly less stigma associated with a vegetarian lifestyle today than in the past. The average age of the participants in my study was 29. These people would have grown up in the 1970s; given the developments discussed above, it is reasonable to think today’s parents would be more open to vegetarianism, although this acceptance or lack thereof will undoubtedly depend upon other sociological factors such as,

1. economic background;
2. geographic location; and
3. educational attainment.

Particularly ripe for analysis is the way in which animal activists learn to take the role of the “animal other” as they make moral decisions. Children seem particularly adept at both the mental exercise of cognitive empathy and the
emotional application of sympathetic empathy, which allows “anonymous” farmed animals (as compared with companion animals who are given a name and a biographical history by family members) to be considered potential subjects-in-interaction. Taking the role of animal others, when performed at later stages of development, enables even animals who are raised for food to be included in moral equations. The exercise of animal-oriented empathy allows farmed animals to be transformed from faceless commodities and “absent referents” (Adams, 1991) into individual subjects—from raw materials and objects back into living, breathing creatures. Future studies should investigate the possibility and capacity of humans across the lifespan for taking the role of animal others, which will not only advance sociological theory but also will bring us one step closer to a more compassionate society in which the interests of all animals are taken seriously.

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**Notes**

1. As has been documented by cultural anthropologists, the foodways of a culture carry great importance because food, beyond mere sustenance, is also imbued with significant symbolic power. Not only are we encouraged through socialization to accept meat eating as natural and necessary, but meat also develops deep-rooted positive associations, such as with family, holidays, emotional security, home and hearth, tradition, economic prosperity, social status, and masculinity (Adams, 1991, Fiddes, 1991, Twigg, 1983).

2. While not all animal rights activists are vegans and not all vegans are animal rights activists, my sample is restricted to individuals who self-identified as both.

3. I located activists using the “snowball” or opportunistic method of sampling. I began with a key informant who introduced me to other activists, and they in turn led me to other potential interviewees, and so on. I defined “active members” as taking active part in the activities of a social movement organization as opposed to a member who might just pay dues but not otherwise participate in the activities of the group (in my sample these activities were mainly public demonstrations, organizational meetings, and educational outreach events).

   My method of operation was to begin with the individuals who represented the most committed “type” of activist in the movement—i.e. vegans who were also active participants with an animal rights organization—in order to understand the recruitment process. My sample consists of those occupying the farthest point at one end of the continuum representing support for animal rights ideology: those who display the greatest degree of “moral consistency” in their lifestyle and beliefs and whose commitment is manifest on both personal and social fronts. In the interviews, a distinction was drawn between “animal rights” and “animal welfare,” and these
participants self-identified as animal rights activists. I used the “known-groups” method (Becker 1958) of sampling and, in accordance with the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), continued to conduct interviews until theoretical saturation was achieved.

4. For a review of relevant research regarding the validity of autobiographical memory, see Chawla (1998).

5. The ages at which respondents went vegetarian and vegan can be found in footnote # 8. In regard to the early memories, it is difficult to precisely calculate an average because oftentimes participants could not recall their exact age; only that they were “very young”, “under ten,” or “real little.”

6. Although this paper will not deal with the transition to veganism, it may be worth noting that the switch to ovo-lactarian vegetarianism and veganism were separate incidents for everyone in my sample. The overall distribution of ages at which activists in my sample went vegetarian was skewed younger than the age distribution for adopting veganism, which is not surprising since vegetarianism logically precedes veganism in that the latter encompasses the former. Fifteen respondents (50%) were vegetarian before age 18, eight respondents (27%) went vegetarian during the transition from teen to adult (age 18-22), and seven respondents (23%) became vegetarian as adults. Five respondents (17%) were vegan before age 18, 13 respondents (43%) went vegan during the transition from teen to adult, and nine respondents (30%) became vegan as adults.

7. The accounts elicited in response to my question about when participants first remembered thinking about animal issues were suggestive of a predisposition that was present before they became activists, which gave them a propensity to notice and be concerned with suffering, victimization, and protecting the helpless. Shapiro (1994) has discussed this tendency with regard to adult animal activists, who show a propensity to notice and even seek out suffering, but the concern here is with the corresponding impulse in children. Though dealing with adults, Shapiro’s findings regarding perception and animal rights activism are consistent with the themes explored here, as is Arluke’s (2003) research on “super-nurturing” children.

8. Amato and Partridge (1989) refer to these epiphanies as “meat insight” experiences.

9. Mead did not discuss animals, except to compare their capacity for meaningful social interaction unfavorably with that of humans, who he believed alone in the animal kingdom possessed the ability for role taking that is a prerequisite for social interaction. However in recent years, social theorists have begun to expand Mead’s theories to include nonhuman animals (Alger & Alger 2003; Irvine 2004; Myers 2003; Sanders 1999). Mead’s theory of taking the role of the other can also be expanded to include the act of humans taking the role of animal-others. This application helps to explain trans-species empathy, an emotion that is widespread among animal rights activists, from a sociological perspective (Pallotta, 2005).

10. In contrast to earlier research that suggested moral vegetarians find meat “more disgusting” than, for example, health vegetarians (Rozin, et al. 1997), a recent study of 945 adults regarding meat consumption, reasons for meat avoidance, and disgust sensitivity, found that individuals who reported avoiding meat for moral reasons were not more sensitive to disgust than those who avoided meat for other reasons. They concluded that moral vegetarians’ disgust reactions to meat are caused by, rather than causal of, their moral beliefs (Fessler, et al., 2003).

11. As one reviewer noted, these experiences could also lead to other actions, such as eating meat but avoiding contact with its preparation. This could be true, but leads into interesting questions about disgust and morality and also points to the inherent limitations of the data. As I only studied one population (adult animal advocates who are also vegan), the data presented here cannot speak to the frequency of these experiences among all members of the population. For instance, it is possible that many children have these early experiences that are indicative of sensitivity to animal suffering, and some may also attempt to resist meat. It could be that most who have these experiences “grow out of them” and become omnivores. As I have discussed
elsewhere, for many these childhood experiences did not lead to an immediate transformation. For most in my sample, adopting an animal rights lifestyle was a gradual process, sometimes taking place over a period of years. It also should be noted that my data is a snapshot of a moment in time, the moment when the interview took place. It could be that all 30 of my respondents have reverted and now eat meat; it could also be that they are all as committed to an animal rights lifestyle as the day I interviewed them. The point is that identity is a moving target and although I did ask if they thought they would remain vegan for the rest of their lives and all answered in the affirmative, the process of becoming an animal activist is just that: a process. Identity as a work-in-progress suggests that certain aspects of this identity may wax and wane over time.

12. There are practical reasons for social forces to channel empathy and not allow it to run amok. To feel sorrow for everyone who suffers a tragedy would most certainly result in emotional exhaustion. Therefore, as with selective perception, which blocks out extraneous visual stimuli and the constant din of noises that might otherwise drive us insane, selective empathy functions to keep us from becoming bogged down in the unfortunate circumstances of others.

13. A critic writes:

The quandary of disconnected meaning—"see how cute the pig is? Now stick him on your fork"—arises full force with *Babe: Pig in the City*. Like the 1995 original, the sequel puts one of our most popular groceries squarely at the center of a heroic fable, in which children identify with a plucky, kind-hearted creature who hopes to surmount his fated destiny as a slice of baloney… Hollywood… is increasingly crossing over from symbolic to literal terrain, with onerous implications for parents. Acts of anthropomorphism that foster sentimentality, drawing children to the box office with puppies and fawns and lion cubs, are reconcilable to the degree that we don't eat pets and wild animals… How, exactly, a child can emerge from *Babe: Pig in the City* to eat a ham sandwich without blowing a gasket is beyond my guessing” (Pearson, 1998).

14. The number of companion animals in American homes has steadily increased over the last 15 years. According to the 2007-2008 National Pet Owners’ Survey (from The American Pet Products Manufacturers' Association), 63% of U.S. households include at least one companion animal, compared to 56% in 1988, the first year the bi-annual survey was conducted.

15. These psychological factors include: 1) structural variables that dissociate consumptive practices from the infliction of harm; 2) mechanisms that reduce personal conflict when dissociation is threatened; 3) in-group—out-group biases; and 4) factors relating to perceived similarity of animals and humans (Plous, 1993). Some of these factors do pertain to children, for instance, children are often deliberately misinformed by adults regarding the conditions of animals on today's farms, many of which are concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) bearing almost no resemblance to the stylized and idealized traditional barnyard images still presented to children.

16. In a 2006 Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG) Harris Interactive survey, 2.3% of those surveyed said they never eat meat, poultry, or fish/seafood, and 1.4 percent of those surveyed said they never eat meat, poultry, fish/seafood, dairy products, eggs, or honey (vegan).

References
