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Editor’s Introduction
The State of Human-Animal Studies: Solid, at the Margin!

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the publication of Society and Animals, we present a set of 14 papers obtained through individual invitations and a general call for papers on the state of Human-Animal Studies (HAS). For the purposes of this exercise, we defined HAS broadly as the remit of S&A as it has evolved over the 10 years to include empirical investigations and conceptual analyses of human-animal relationships in both the social sciences and the humanities.

We asked contributors to respond to two questions: What has your field contributed to animal studies thus far? What does your field need to do to advance animal studies? The fields represented in the anniversary issue are psychology, sociology, anthropology, criminology, geography, political science, economics, history, postcolonial studies, and feminist studies.

In addition to these papers, guest editor introductions address the state of human-animal studies in four special S&A theme issues: consumer sociology, (4, 2, 1996); geography, (6, 2, 1998); religion, (8, 3, 1999).
and representational arts, (9, 3, 2001). One other paper of interest discusses a recent effort to assess the strength and scope of the intellectual infrastructure of the Animal Rights Movement (Shapiro, 2000).

**Scope and Reach of HAS**

In the inaugural issue of *S&A* (1, 1, 1993), I called for the development of an academic field to investigate all aspects of HAS, respecting animals other than humans by treating them as beings with their own experience and interests—not exclusively as cultural artifacts, symbols, models, or commodities in a largely human-centered world. Doing so would secure the place of animals other than humans in the “moral landscape,” to use Wolch’s phrase.

This second criterion for HAS is important but perhaps controversial and certainly muddy in its application. It bears discussion here. Some fields rarely include animals other than humans and, presumably, we all are working to expand their scope. However, others traditionally have included, or are beginning to include, animals other than humans, but in ways that remain reductive and disrespectful.

Consider the following examples:

1. Ethological study of a species other than humans;
2. Anthropological study of the role of a domesticated species in the economy of a human subculture;
3. Literary study of an animal as a symbol of a human trait; and
4. Clinical study of a person treated through animal-assisted therapy.

The first example is not a study of a human-animal relation and so is not part of HAS. However, what would happen if the authors applied that information to understand further an existing or even possible human-animal relation?

The second study describes animals as commodities. Arguably, animal-as-commodity is a form of human-animal relation (cf. human slavery). But if the study exclusively describes the impact of that commodity in human economic terms, is it part of HAS?

The third and fourth studies could stay on an exclusively human level—describing, respectively, how a particular symbol works in the literary text...
to illuminate human being or how a form of psychological treatment impacts on a particular human disorder. Do these cases contribute to our understanding of a human-animal relation? If they do, is it in a way in which the animal is treated as a being with his or her own experience and interests? Or, are these studies more akin to a laboratory-based study of an animal model of a human being where the animal is a human stand-in or container?

At the time of the inaugural issue, our initial goal was to expand the reach of HAS by forming a small core of scholars in each of the existing social sciences committed to its emergence. Through the existing journal *Anthrozoös*, which began publishing in 1987, a good start already had been made.

**Appraisal of HAS**

This issue is an attempt to assess our progress. My general impression is that our gains are modest. I must admit that the set of papers as a whole are less positive in their assessments than I had anticipated, and I have changed my view accordingly. I invite readers to submit comments on HAS as a whole or within any given discipline of interest.

In terms of the goal of a core set of scholars in existing disciplines, we have made some progress. In the fields of sociology, psychology, and geography, we have such a core. Currently, the first two of these are attempting to form a section or division within the respective major professional organizations. Although neither yet has been successful, both have made good progress and, in the process, have identified a larger group of scholars interested in HAS. However, in political science, history, criminology, feminist studies, and postcolonial studies only a very few scholars are working in HAS. In economics, there is, to date, only a programmatic call for HAS studies.

Turning to the papers in this issue, Gerbasi, Anderson, Gerbasi, and Coulitis report progress in HAS as measured by doctoral dissertations completed in HAS in the 1980s versus the 1990s. (See list at psyeta.org/dissertations/dissertations.html). On the positive side, numbers increased more in the 1990s and at a faster rate than the increase in numbers of all dissertations. However, the authors also found a diffused distribution of university sites and advisors. In other words, HAS is not finding institutional-based homes—sites that
provide robust and ongoing research programs. Related to this is the relative lack of academic programs within the purview of HAS. By contrast, there are at least 650 women’s studies programs or departments in U.S. institutions (creativefolk.com/directories.html).

Running through many of the papers on specific fields is the view that HAS, at best, has attained marginal standing. Raupp speaks of a “furry ceiling” in clinical psychology. Arluke refers to the “lack of interest within sociology of animal studies.” Although noting an increased visibility in criminology, Beirne refers to “professional marginalization.” In political science, Garner sees HAS as a “peripheral part of the mainstream;” and Birke speaks of the “absence” of animals other than humans in feminist studies.

Clearly, the goal of a committed core of scholars in various fields, to the limited degree achieved to date, has had limited impact. HAS gains in the past decade, however, include access to publication venues. Many major publishing houses published several books in the field; we have a number of dedicated book series; and HAS is the devoted topic of courses in a number of fields (Balcombe, 1999) and part of the syllabus in many other courses. Yet, we have only occasional access to the primary journal venues in many fields, and we have established only a small number of dedicated academic programs.

**Obstacles to HAS**

How do we get from the margin to the main body of the text? What are the obstacles to a more robust, established, and politically influential HAS? Arluke attributes a significant block to the impoverishment in the theoretical innovations of contributions to HAS and to the androcentric bias in the existing modest efforts at theorizing. At the same time, he and others call for more direct attention to potential applications of the contributions. Herzog suggests adoption of evolution as a theoretical frame, riding the coattails of the emerging field of evolutionary psychology.

Several authors point to the continuing impact of the traditional categorical divide between human and other animal being as an underlying block embodied, for example, in the attribution of the reduced category of “property” to animals other than humans.
In the interest of stimulating further discussion, let me add to the description of these blocks, beginning in the more ethereal domain of ideology and method and moving down to earth to politics. The categorical divide is basic and extends to how we have named, and the exclusionary way we continue to interpret, the traditional fields of study: the “social” in social science, the “homo” in the humanities, and “psycho,” “socio,” “anthropo,” in the respective particular disciplines. No “zo-o’s” need apply. (It is symptomatic of the power of the divide’s control over language that each of the titles of the two major HAS journals, Anthrozoös and Society & Animals, commits a related categorical error). Contemporary usage can be forgiven forgetting that “anima” (enlivenment, life, spirit) is the etymological base of animal while that of human denotes soil. But how can we deny the modern (re)discovery of the marvelous capabilities of animals other than humans and, building on that, the recent extensions of both deontological and utilitarian moral philosophy to include most animals? The Enlightenment, which valorized human being to correct for the Medieval preoccupation with God, long ago completed its work. Let’s move on to a bio-centered perspective within which the study of human-animal relationships can fit snugly.

A methodological or, really, epistemological block also is a serious problem. If HAS requires a more robust being for animals other than humans, can we know that being within the constraints of scientific knowledge? Can we understand the “world-as-experienced” of these animals and do we need to to sustain a HAS? Can we know what it is like to be a bat (Nagel, 1974)? Can we apply traditional social scientific methods of inquiry to the study of cats and dogs (Alger & Alger, 1999)? Or, do we require methodological innovations (Shapiro, 1997)? Will these compromise the reputed rigor of human-based investigatory methods? Can we skirt the powerful psychological tendency to attribute falsely (project) human characteristics onto animals other than humans (anthropomorphism)? Can we bare the many layers of meanings in our constructions of animals? Should these meanings be bracketed to obtain an understanding of human-animal relations, or do they constitute those relations?

The sophistication of postmodern interpretative methods (deconstruction, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology) suggest that we explicate and properly evaluate these meanings. The melding of technology that allows noninvasive
in vivo observation of brain/behavior relations in animals of various species also is a promising possibility.

On the ground, the blocks are more political and economic. Within the academy, many point to HAS’s limitation as an interdisciplinary field competing for resources in institutions largely structured and funded as distinct fields. But both Women’s and African-American Studies have gained significant financial support. Also, it is not clear that HAS needs to be interdisciplinary. It could stake out a claim within various given fields, each of which would treat HAS as subjects—a group of animals as a social group or subculture, respectively, in sociology and anthropology—or even simply as topics—the role of animals in the socialization of children, in developmental psychology.

It is a strategic decision whether HAS should be developed as a distinct field or program and whether such is an ultimate goal or transitional to the larger goal of assimilation of HAS into current disciplinary structures of the academy. Mutatis mutandis, should S&A and Anthrozoöös work to put themselves out of business, with the final goal of the assimilation of studies of human-animal relations into extant mainstream journals?

Politics outside the academy also is a critical contributor to the well-being of HAS as the twin emergence of the contemporary animal rights movement (ARM) and HAS historically were, and no doubt will continue to be, intertwined. There are assets and liabilities in this association. For HAS, the association with ARM gives the field a supplementary institutional infra-structure and audience outside the academy. It also gives it relevance, cachet, and a compelling set of practical applications and policy implications.

On the liability side, the undeserved charge of violence and terrorism, with all that term currently carries, readily spills over to HAS. More insidiously, HAS is vulnerable to the charge that an ARM agenda biases its investigations and scholarship. As do most movements that challenge basic established practices, in the short term ARM is as volatile as the stock market, with no promise of long-term gain or even continued existence.

Again, I invite reader comments on any or all of these papers or on my reading of them.

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References


