

## **A Sociology of Sociological Animal Studies**

I am convinced that the most formidable barriers to the future development of sociological nonhuman animal studies are internal rather than external to sociology. The obstacles come from sociologists, both those who do and do not do research in this area, and how they think about the study of human-animal relationships. As I considered these barriers, and how future research could address or remedy them, I found myself asking some “old” questions that some sociologists have asked before, such as why is there a lack of interest within sociology to animal studies, and some new questions, such as should sociologists who do animal studies adopt a different approach to this area? Despite the fact that some of these issues are inevitably part of the formation and growth of any new specialty, I do not think it is a waste of time to pose these “sociology of sociology” concerns and revisit them from time to time to foster healthy self-reflection and awareness, if not some new strategies for growth.

First, why has sociology not produced more animal-studies research and what does this say about the discipline? Although sociologists have shown increasing interest in this topic, it hardly can be called a

flood. A number of sociologists have fought for years to stimulate interest within sociology through research, editorial work, and professional organizing but have met with resistance and apathy as much as sympathy and support. Other social science disciplines, however, have run with the ball. Anthropology, for one, long ago labeled animal studies a “growth field” and accorded it space in an annual state-of-the-art review (Shanklin, 1985). By contrast, sociologists have not acknowledged the importance of animal studies; indeed, some have belittled it as mere “boutique” sociology.

This reaction strikes me as ironic given sociology’s willingness, even eagerness, to grant legitimacy to a variety of area studies for groups that have been oppressed, including—but not limited to—African-American studies, women’s studies, Latino studies, disability studies, and gay/lesbian studies. Although explanations for this resistance usually blame sociology’s androcentric bias or institutional conservatism, I believe this issue is more complicated and subtle. Pinpointing the nature and source of this resistance allows us to reach out—including, but not limited to, soliciting joint research projects—to those sociologists most likely to decry the value of animal studies and contest its legitimacy.

My impression is that one such pocket of resistance comes from sociologists affiliated with oppressed group area studies. As you listen to their objections or hesitations about animal studies, sometimes peppered with giggles and sarcasm, what comes through is a vague discomfort with the very idea of studying human-animal relationships. If my speculation is correct, then why are they disturbed or troubled with animal studies? Is it possible that advocates from these sociologically approved specialties see animal studies as an unwelcome interloper that will compete for university and foundation resources in an increasingly competitive financial environment of ever-shrinking budgets for research support? Is it possible that they see animal studies as a new competitor in a zero-sum game of status and power as various specialty studies groups vie for increasing visibility and clout in academe? Is it possible that they see animal studies as a parody of their specialty because interest in non-human animals tarnishes or cheapens whatever group they champion and somehow, in their minds, trivializes the very notion of oppression? If so, this reveals more about the political and psychological insecurities of these area-study advocates than it does about animal studies and what it offers

sociology. Yet these pockets of resistance have the potential to become our strongest allies. A sociology of sociology approach may be well worth the time and effort to confirm the nature, strength, and source of resistance within the field, so we can focus and tailor some sort of outreach to make collaborators out of our critics.

Second, how do we think about and organize our prior accomplishments? Prior state of the art reviews (Bryant, 1979, 1993) have topically organized sociological research on human-animal relationships, so we see lists of publications on animals in the family, animals in advertising, and crimes against animals. Putting aside the practical or heuristic value of topical lists, they may be symptomatic of our specialty's infancy and, as yet, limited theoretical contribution. Our theoretical contributions have been very modest to date, as is true of most emerging research specialties. Indeed, a few studies regarded as "classics" (Kellert, 1976) neither build upon or contribute much if anything to sociological theory *per se*.

Most others are derivative (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992), showing how old sociological theories apply to this new subject of study, although they at least stake a sociological claim to the topic of human-animal relationships. Beside the strategic importance of extending sociology into animal studies, this research represents a small, theoretically informed body of research that allows for more conceptual categorization of our work. There is evidence of this, especially among symbolic interactionist studies of human-animal relationships, where attention has focused on issues such as the following: framing (Munro, 1997); stigma management (Twining & Arluke, 2000); negotiated orders (Balcom & Arluke, 2001); intersubjectivity (Sanders, 1999); the animal as other (Arluke, 1994); emotion management (Arluke, 1991); socialization (Arluke & Hafferty, 1996); negotiated meanings (Dizard, 1994); and identity work (Groves & Arluke, 1998)—to name a few.

We should stop thinking about and organizing our work along topical lines for academic and political reasons. Theoretically organizing our efforts provides a better vantage point to assess what we have done and to see where we need to go. In addition, the more we can describe our specialty's theoretical contribution, however modest, the more we can enhance the legitimacy of animal studies in the eyes of doubting sociologists; many question the value of this research and the justification for creating an animal studies specialty.

At the risk of appearing contradictory, my third and final question asks, should sociologists also undertake more applied research in this specialty than we do now? I think we are missing the boat in this regard, although there simply may not be enough sociologists interested in animal studies to address all the concerns I raise. Nevertheless, as more sociologists get involved in this specialty, and if the course of research continues in its current direction, we may want to take a lesson from medical sociology, only in reverse.

In the 1950s, medical sociology was itself questioning its identity as a new subfield (Reader, 1963). The controversy was that too many sociologists were doing what was dubbed “sociology *in* medicine,” which entailed answering research questions that served the interests of health-care providers (e.g., why don’t more patients take their medications as prescribed?). Some sociologists argued that a less “applied” and more “basic” medical sociology, called the “sociology *of* medicine,” was desperately needed in order to pose research questions that would be theoretically more interesting to sociologists and analytically more critical of the practice of medicine, medical institutions, and providers. I argue that the current state of the sociology of human-animal relationships is the reverse of where medical sociology was decades ago.

The bulk of what sociologists write about in animal studies is more akin to the sociology of medicine. Like the sociology of medicine, sociological research in animal studies has been driven by our own research agenda rather than by the needs of animal advocates and non-scholars who work directly with or for animals. I would like to see more sociological interest in understanding and assessing activities such as pet visitation programs or the use of animals as therapeutic aids—just to name two topics that could benefit from the sociologist’s perspective and training.

Of course, with any applied research—and animal studies is no exception—there are dangers and pitfalls to avoid, but these are manageable and do not outweigh the potential benefits to practitioners, advocates, and sociologists. Entire aspects of animal studies have been off limits, if not taboo topics, to some humane organizations. For example, the unsavory nature of the “dark side” of human-animal relationships (Rowan, 1992) has led groups like the Delta Society to ignore issues such as animal cruelty when choosing talks for its annual professional meeting and setting an editorial agenda for its journal, *Anthrozoös*, when the society and the journal were closely connected.

Nor is it just a matter of limiting our research agenda. When the humane community considers the dark side, researchers studying this issue must contend with a spirited party line or orthodoxy when sharing their findings. Take my own research on the so-called “link” between animal cruelty and other kinds of crimes (Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999). Although my work found strong statistical associations between cruelty and crime, there was no basis to argue, as do many humane advocates, that cruelty is a predictor of subsequent human violence. Yet as moral entrepreneurs, various animal welfare and rights groups have selectively reported my findings as evidence *for* the link and have labeled me the “doubter” or the academic “wet towel” for not getting on board the ideological train with everyone else. While no picnic, such struggles are to be expected and should not stop us from venturing into the applied realm.

Clearly, other sociology of sociology questions about animal studies can and should be raised, in addition to those posed here. Asking and debating these sorts of questions will serve us well down the line as sociological interest in animal studies matures and acceptance of the specialty grows.

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## Note

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