

## **Social Animals: Animal Studies and Sociology**

The American Sociological Association recently granted full section status to a new Animals and Society section. Not all sociologists have been overjoyed with this development (Perrow, 2000). This is unfortunate, but expected. As Noske (1991) has noted, “the social sciences tend to present themselves pre-eminently as the sciences of discontinuity between humans and animals.” Sociologists, therefore, are supposed to study people, not other creatures. Paradoxically, by concentrating exclusively on humans we have neglected an enormous facet of human existence. “By focusing on differences between humans and other animals, sociologists have lost sight of all that we share with them” (Murphy, 1995, p. 692).

The sociological literature, although somewhat sparse, is growing. In the past, sociologists have left “animal studies” to other disciplines. A burgeoning interest, combined with the emergence of venues such as *Society & Animals* as well as a greater willingness of “mainstream” sociological journals to consider socio-zoological articles, bodes well for the future. This trend will be enhanced as the sophistication of the scholarship increases. Sociologists have provided

important insights in a variety of areas. Perhaps the largest impact has been in the study of social movements. Jasper's work (1997, 1999; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992) is of particular importance, but others also have made contributions to this literature (Einwohner, 1999; Groves, 1997; Kean, 1998; Kruse, 2001). The relative acceptance of "animal" work in this area may be due to the tendency of social movement scholars to concentrate on "marginal" organizations as well as the fact that the focus is not on animals *per se*, but on human activity.

The study of race, class, and gender also has been enhanced by examining the role of animals in human society. This area holds great potential for future work. Animals, and our uses of them, play a vital part in racialization (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Elder, Wolch, & Emel, 1998) and the construction of gender. Likewise, class is, in numerous ways, tied to our relations to the animal world (Franklin, 1996, 1998). It is here where those who study animals in human society have a potential truly to influence sociology. These topics represent bedrock elements of stratification and provide fertile theoretical ground for scholars. The rich ecofeminist literature (Donovan, 1990; Gaard, 1993; Gruen, 1993) has provided much food for thought, but we also must explore and advance other paradigms. To do so would likely increase respect for the entire field of animal studies.

Criminology and deviance also are ripe for animal-focused scholarship. Bryant (1979, p. 412) has suggested that the transgression of social norms relating to the treatment of animals "may well be among the most ubiquitous of any social deviance." Despite his call for greater focus on "zoological crime," sociologists have paid little attention to the way in which animals are treated by humans. The criminological literature is lamentably silent on issues of animal abuse. This is not to say that animals are completely absent; however, they enter the discussion only indirectly, never as the center of attention (Cazaux, 1998). "Animals only appear in . . . reports because they are seen as involved in some problematic aspect of human social relationships. . . . Nowhere is the psychological and physical abuse of animals an object of study in its own right" (Bierne, 1995, p. 22).

One exception to this trend is in the study of the relationship between cruelty to animals and human violence. Unfortunately, much research on this potential link comes from retrospective studies that draw upon biased populations such as prisoners or psychiatric patients (Felthous, 1979, 1984; Felthous

& Kellert, 1987; Ressler, Burgess, Hartman, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986). Some comparative work involving non-institutionalized populations has been done, with mixed results (Flynn, 1999; Miller & Knutson, 1997). Future work must be refined both theoretically and methodologically. For a discussion of some shortcomings of the current literature, see Kruse (in press). For example, a distinction must be drawn between sanctioned and antisocial aggression; engaging in violent acts that are accepted by society does not predict necessarily the tendency to act out in societally condemned ways.

Many of us, when we tell other sociologists of our interest in animals, have experienced responses that range from amusement to derision. There is no reason why this should be. Animals share our homes as companions whom often we treat as members of the family; we even may buy clothing for them, celebrate their birthdays, and take them with us when we go on vacation. At the same time, the majority of us consume their flesh and wear their skins. We refer to them when we speak of someone's being "sly as a fox" or call someone a "bitch." Political protest ignites because of disagreement over the status and treatment of animals. We can view their lives on the "Animal Planet" network or television shows such as "Wild Discovery" and subscribe to magazines such as "Arabian Horse World" or "Reptiles America." In these and myriad other ways, the human and nonhuman worlds are inexorably bound. The task, for those of us interested in animals, is to demonstrate this connection.

Sociologists should not be "alarmed to see sociological energies going into the formation of a new [Animals and Society] section in the ASA" (Perrow, 2000, p. 473); they should celebrate it. Human action is embedded in a world populated by many species. By any measure, the role that animals play in human society is enormous. If they truly were as far removed from our lives as they have tended to be from sociology, it would be a bland existence indeed.

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## Note

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