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The question of animal selves: Implications for sociological knowledge and practice

Abstract

The question of whether sociologists should investigate the subjective experience of non-human others arises regularly in discussions of research on animals. Recent criticism of this research agenda as speculative and therefore unproductive is examined and found wanting. Ample evidence indicates that animals have the capacity to see themselves as objects, which meets sociological criteria for selfhood. Resistance to this possibility highlights the discipline's entrenched anthropocentrism rather than lack of evidence. Sociological study of the moral status of animals, based on the presence of the self, is warranted because our treatment of animals is connected with numerous "mainstream" sociological issues. As knowledge has brought other forms of oppression to light, it has also helped to challenge and transform oppressive conditions. Consequently, sociologists have an obligation to challenge speciesism as part of a larger system of oppression.

Keywords

Animals; Self; Mead; Animal cognition; Consciousness

The intelligence of the lower forms of animal life, like a great deal of human intelligence, does not involve a self. (Mead [1934] 1962: 135)

Future human-animal investigations should probably focus less on unverifiable speculations about the inner lives of animals and examine instead what is knowable about human-animal interactions and the significance that humans attribute to them. (Jerolmack 2005: 660)

Because animals do not, and cannot (I argue), wonder what humans (or any other organism) are 'thinking' they do not (and cannot) possess a mind or self. (Waskul 2004)

Do non-human animals have selves? Is the answer relevant for sociology, and if so, how? Most mainstream sociological work does not consider animals at all. For that matter, most mainstream sociology does not consider the issue of selves, regardless of species. For the majority of topics that sociologists study, the self never enters the picture. Consequently, one could easily dismiss the relevance of animals' inner lives for the discipline. As conveyed in the quote from Colin Jerolmack (2005)

above, some see this as the more productive sociological position: *Let us concentrate on verifiable observations and focus on what animals mean for human lives.* Despite this advice, a number of the seminal sociological works on human-animal interaction engage with questions about animal selves. Janet and Steven Alger (1997, 1999, 2003a) have observed interaction among cats and between cats and humans for over a decade. In their book, *Cat Culture* (2003a), they draw on extensive ethnography in a cat shelter and in multi-cat households to show how cats manifest self-awareness. Using indicators outlined by cognitive ethologist Donald Griffin (1976, 1992) and biologist Marian Stamp Dawkins (1987, 1998), among others, Alger and Alger document a wide range of emotions, the ability to learn from others, cooperation, adaptation, and complexity of behavior within the cat community. Clinton Sanders (1999, 2000, 2003) focuses on interactions between people and dogs. His qualitative research consistently presents a view of animals as minded, social actors who “have at least a rudimentary ability to construct meaning—to purposefully define situations and devise coherent plans of action on the basis of these definitions” (1999: 5). His studies of people and their canine companions have led him to advocate an expanded view of “personhood” and of the process through which we construct and assign that designation. He also argues for “an expanded view of mind that, like personhood, we can best understand as arising out of social interaction” (2003: 407). Moreover, his work demonstrates that “the conventional, linguicentric perspective on mind-as-internal-conversation is inadequate and confining” (2003: 407). Along similar lines, Keri Brandt’s (2004) ethnographic research on human-horse interaction suggests the need for a new understanding of language that emphasizes the embodied nature of subjectivity. Likewise, Krzysztof Konecki (2005) argues that corporeality is the basis for a shared reality between companion animals and their guardians. My work (Irvine 2004a, b, c), makes use of ethnography and interviews to develop a model of animal selfhood based on concepts used in studies of the subjective experience of infants. Instead of relying on a language-based model of the self, I offer a wider conceptual lens that emphasizes the components of interaction. I have also examined play between humans and animals as a window on intersubjective experience (Irvine, 2001). In studies of children’s interaction with animals, Olin Myers (1998) found that even without spoken language, an animal could be “a genuine (not merely projected or falsely assimilated) ‘other’” to a child “in the dialectical and self-reflective process of subjective and objective senses of self” (Myers 2003: 56)

These works argue that animal selves *are* verifiable through observation; however, we must first rethink how and what we will observe. Exploring the question of animal selves constitutes nothing less than a reshaping of the discipline. As this essay points out, this reshaping is long overdue. Sociologists regularly overlook, disparage, and dismiss evidence of similarities between humans and other animals (see Arluke 2003; Kruse 2003). One can only dismiss the importance of animals’ inner lives by dismissing entire bodies of research that document human-animal continuity in the form of animal minds, communication skills, and emotions. In what follows, I examine why animal selves are important for sociology, arguing that the omission stems more from the discipline’s anthropocentric assumptions rather than from any lack of evidence.

On (re)defining the self

To explore the possibility of animal selves, it would be helpful to have a definition of what we should look for. However a singular definition of the self is problematic because the term refers to a range of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional manifestations. As a term, “the self” is folk psychology. It encompasses “what everybody knows” about why people act and think as they do. Consequently, the term has numerous uses. It can refer to the self-concept, or to self-esteem, the soul, the “inner child” of pop psychology, or a host of other ideas (see Irvine 1999 for a review). Some might even argue that selfhood is an illusion or a fiction. A “sense” of self might not be a sense at all, but simply an epiphenomenon, or side-effect of the way our brains function.

Traditionally, the sociological starting point for defining the self is Mead’s assertion that it involves the capacity to see oneself as an object. This capacity gives humans the ability to coordinate activities with others in complex social environments. Mead ([1934] 1962) claimed that the self developed alongside the capacities for spoken language and the reflective capacities of the mind. He argued that the self is a product of evolution, allowing for complex, adaptive social behavior.ⁱ These abilities made human society possible by coordinating uniquely complex forms of interaction.

Mead pointed out that the process of seeing ourselves as objects involves the appearance of a “me” in consciousness (Mead 1913). Selfhood therefore presupposes consciousness. In this sense, consciousness means more than simply wakefulness or awareness of sensation (being “conscious” rather than “unconscious”). Consciousness, as used here, is more akin to self-consciousness, in that it involves the reflexive capacity. This, in turn, allows us to adapt our behavior, which is a valuable skill in a complex social world.

At this point, a basic working definition of the self becomes possible. It can be defined as an image (or images) of ourselves (as an object) that appears in consciousness, around which we adapt our subsequent behavior. For Mead, and for generations of sociologists to follow, the self distinguishes humans from other animals. Mead was very certain that the “lower animals,” as he referred to them, did not have the capacity to see themselves as objects. In the epigraph by Dennis Waskul at the start of this paper, taken from the discussion list of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, the belief that animals are unable to see themselves as objects still holds, at least for some scholars. Research has shown that Mead was mistaken.ⁱⁱ

Do animals have selves?

Animals and Consciousness

There is ample evidence that many species of animals can see themselves as objects. Those who take a skeptical position on animal selves would up the ante by requiring that the definition of the self includes language. However, I would argue that most of the instances in which we humans see ourselves as objects do not involve language. If we simply look for evidence of the capacity to see oneself as an object, which indicates consciousness, then non-human animals can enter the conversation.

Few would deny that non-human animals can adapt their behavior. Moreover, behavioral flexibility is among the features commonly drawn on to support attributions

of consciousness among animals (Griffin 1976, 1992; see also Allen and Bekoff 1997, 153). Examples of animals adapting their behavior are abundant, among wild as well as domesticated animals. For instance, dog training involves encouraging the dog to shape his or her behavior to human expectations (see Arluke and Sanders 1996; Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004a). Dogs will also modify their behavior on their own. For example, while walking with my dog, Skipper, I began throwing a stick into a creek for him to retrieve. We stood on a smoothly banked section of the creek, and Skipper waded into shoulder-deep water to get the stick. However, at one point, the current carried the stick to an area with deeper water and a steep, cliff-like bank. Skipper does not enjoy swimming. He could have given up on the stick as it disappeared downstream. Instead, after investigating the bank further down the creek, he found another smoothly inclined spot and waited for the stick to arrive.ⁱⁱⁱ There could be many explanations for Skipper's behavior, but one of these surely must be a rudimentary understanding of causality and the ability to adjust one's behavior to intervene in the action.

Although cats are seldom formally trained, they regularly monitor their own "performances" and make adjustments accordingly. For example, all five cats in my house have learned to jump up on the nearest high surface when they want to get away from Skipper. They could easily outrun him, but they seem to reserve running for times when they want to engage in play. When they want to get out of harm's way, they know that up is the way to go. Similarly, when Steven and Janet Alger studied interaction in a cat shelter, they found that even in behavior such as territoriality, the cats engaged in negotiation rather than constant dominance and outright aggression. With two exceptions, cats who fought on some occasions would not necessarily fight all the time. Instead, their shows of dominance were "highly relative and limited by time and place and activity" (2003a: 130).

Examples of behavioral flexibility from the wild are numerous. The research is especially important in this context because it indicates not only the ability to adapt behavior, but also that animals use the kind of referential communication that Mead claimed did not exist among animals. Using the example of a dog fight, Mead explained that "we have here a conversation of gestures. They are not, however, gestures in the sense that they are significant. We do not assume that the dog says to himself, 'If the animal comes from this direction he is going to spring at my throat and I will turn in such a way'" ([1934] 1962: 43).^{iv} However, many studies have confirmed that numerous species have cognitive abilities that Mead and his contemporaries did not recognize. Indeed, research has "confirmed that the ability to discriminate between different alarm calls that signal the presence of different predators exists in a variety of species and that such signals lead to predictable behavior by the receivers" (Rogers and Kaplan 2004, 189). For instance, vervet monkeys distinguish between different vocalizations and respond accordingly (Seyfarth, Cheney, and Marler 1980). One type of vocalization signals "leopard," and the monkeys climb into the trees, but another sends them looking for snakes on the ground. The evolutionary benefits of this ability are clear, in that referential signaling and flexible behavior allows the monkeys to avoid different kinds of predators. Studies have revealed similar abilities among squirrels (Greene and Meagher 1998), meerkats (Manser 2001), marmots (Blumstein and Armitage 1997), and domestic chickens (Marler and Evans 1996; Evans 1997). The existence of a complex communication system indicates that "alarm calls may be intentional and convey meaning beyond a simple 'read-out' of the sender's emotional state" (Rogers and Kaplan 2004, 189; see also Kaplan and Rogers 2001). Among companion animals, examples of behavioral flexibility are numerous. Some of the earliest observations

come from the work of the Nobel Prize winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1952, 1953), best known for studying the imprinting of geese. Among the many examples recorded among dogs and cats, their ability to adjust their behavior around children and their play strategies are noteworthy.

The ability to adapt behavior indicates consciousness because it implies monitoring of one's own performance: "If this happens, I do that; if that happens, I do something else." In addition to behavioral flexibility, another characteristic that indicates consciousness is multi-sensory integration, or the ability to access information from different information pathways (see Allen and Bekoff 1997). For example, I might recognize a friend from a distance by the general shape of her body or the way she walks. If I cannot see her, I could nevertheless recognize her voice if she called out to me. Her dog could also recognize her scent. Species differ in the capacity to respond to certain stimuli, and her dog would have the advantage here, but I might also recognize her customary perfume. In short, multi-sensory integration means that we use various sensory pathways to gather information about our world. It is relevant for consciousness because it allows for the detection of misinformation based on a single input. For example, if I see someone who at first appears to be my friend, but then I hear that person speak in a voice I do not recognize, I can adjust my behavior to avoid the surprise and embarrassment of misidentifying that person. Likewise, Skipper might initially shy away from me if I appeared from a distance in a rain cape and hat. If I spoke to him on approaching, however, he would not be fooled, and once he sniffed me the test would be over. The ability to integrate information from different sensory pathways allows beings to detect misinformation and respond to it. The resulting behavioral flexibility both depends on and indicates consciousness.

Evidence of a *theory of mind* constitutes a reliable indicator of awareness of self. This refers to the ability to know (or wonder) what another individual is thinking (see Gopnik 1993, for a review). Human infants show evidence of being capable to interpret the mental states of others at between two and three years of age. Many species of animals have also demonstrated this ability. Chimpanzees and macaques have successfully distinguished between the "knower" and the "guesser," learning to act on the advice of the former rather than the latter (Thomassello and Call 1997; Povinelli, Nelson, and Boysen 1990; Povinelli, Parks, and Novak 1991).

One reliable indicator of whether an individual has a theory of mind is the ability to share the focus of attention. When a person or animal "attend[s] to the direction in which another is looking, the individual must have first realized that the other is attending to something different and at a distance" (Rogers and Kaplan 2004: 182). In infants, the capacity to alternately look at the mother's face and a "target" that the mother is pointing to or looking at begins at about twelve months of age. The act of alternately following the mother's gaze while "checking in" with her eyes and face suggests more than simply the ability to follow the mother's line of vision. It constitutes "a deliberate attempt to validate whether the joint attention has been achieved, that is, whether the focus of attention is being shared" (Stern 1985: 129).

Domestic dogs regularly follow the gaze of their human companions (see Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004a). As Sanders points out, dogs "display considerable interest in human facial expression and direct their own gaze in the directions indicated by human attention" (1999: 144). Research shows that dogs perform better at mutual looking than do great apes (Call 2003).^v Dogs perform remarkably well in tasks requiring that they interpret signals from people, such as gazing and pointing, in order to find food. Dogs' striking ability to follow human signals is especially relevant for the self because the ability is not thought to be instinctual. Dogs (and even puppies) perform

these tasks far better than do wolves (Vila, Maldonado, and Wayne 1999; Wayne and Ostrander 1999). This indicates that the ability may have been acquired during the long process of domestication (Ruvinsky and Sampson 2001), which makes it a highly interactional, social skill.

In sum, the past decade, in particular, has seen mounting evidence that animals have the ability to see themselves as objects. We can acknowledge that animals have this ability even if we also want to argue that it is impossible to know the quality or contents of their consciousness. Thus, we can grant animals consciousness even if we do not have access to exactly what their consciousness is “like.” But this begs the question of whether consciousness is tantamount to the self.

Consciousness and Selfhood

The concern for sociologists, whether focusing on human or non-human animals, has historically been the *self*, rather than consciousness. The term consciousness seldom appears in the sociological literature. I contend that sociologists have created an arbitrary distinction between self and consciousness and have entered the conversation only when the most sophisticated expressions of self-awareness appear. More specifically, sociologists have staked their claims only once spoken language and high levels of coordinated activity appear. In doing so, they deemed any less sophisticated expressions of self-awareness as unworthy of sociological investigation. They have defined the self in such uniquely human terms that it is impossible for other animals to “have” or “be” selves

Because of Mead’s influence, and particularly because of his emphasis on language, sociologists who study the self have traditionally done so through narratives or descriptions of self-concepts. Such research provides insight into how selfhood is constructed within the context of language, but it fails to offer a coherent theory of self in the absence of verbal ability. In response, scholars have ventured into this terrain with the study of selfhood among the mentally disabled (Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985; Bogdan and Taylor 1989), Alzheimer’s patients (Gubrium 1986), infants (Brazelton 1984; Stern 1985), deaf and blind children (Goode 1994), autistic children (Rocque 2003), and companion animals (Sanders 1999; Alger and Alger 1997, 2003; Irvine 2004a,b,c; Konecki 2005). In all these instances, those who provide care for others who have no capacity for verbal expression “literally ‘do’ the minds and selves” of those who cannot speak” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 152). Through close, frequent interaction over a significant period, caregivers learn to read the non-verbal indicators of the self.

The criticism launched against this research is that attributing selves to those who cannot speak simply imposes a sense of self, with varying degrees of legitimacy for doing so. In the case of animals, it lays one open to charges of anthropomorphism. Granting selfhood to animals, most commonly in the form of personality, is something all children do. However, the tendency is shamed out of most of us before adulthood, as we are told that it is silly to believe that animals can think or feel as we do. Mead put it differently, but the message is the same. He wrote that “we, of course, tend to endow our domestic animals with personality, but as we get insight into their conditions we see there is no place for this sort of importation of the social process into the conduct of the individual” ([1934] 1962: 182). In contrast, a decade’s worth of sociological research on human-animal interaction argues that as we get insight into the “conditions” of animals, we gain more evidence for their ability to see themselves as

objects (see Arluke and Sanders 1996; Sanders 1999; Sanders and Arluke 1993; Alger and Alger 2003b; Irvine 2004a, b, c).

It is time to revise the sociological understanding of the self away from the focus on language. Skeptics will reply that changing the definition of the self to include animals is an unfair move. I would make clear that I do not claim that humans and non-human animals have exactly the same capacities. I have no illusions that my dog and my cats harbor any desire to compose their memoirs, nor do I believe the birds I hear outside care one wit about what I think. I agree that humans have a highly sophisticated sense of self that allows us to accomplish interactions that animals cannot undertake. However, as Arluke and Sanders (1996) pointed out, I argue that the differences are of *degree* rather than *kind*. Non-human animals have capacities that are important for their social lives, and it would be as unfair to measure human potential by their capacities as it is to measure their potential by human capacities. As far as a sociological understanding of animals and selfhood is concerned, the game has been rigged from the start. It is not biological, social, or psychological deficiencies that prevent the acknowledgement of animal selfhood; it is anthropocentrism, or the belief that all things should be judged in relation to humans. The prospect of animal selves is simply threatening to our field of study. In defense, we elevate humankind even while abundant research reveals continuities across species.

Anthropocentrism: The price of defending sociology's terrain

Anthropocentrism is one of the oldest social constructions. Anthropological research suggests that pre-literate peoples lived with nature in a relationship of oneness and respect (see Ingold 1994; Schwabe 1994; Noske 1997). To be sure, people could distinguish themselves from animals, but there is no evidence that they saw themselves as superior to the other creatures around them. They used animals' bodies to meet their material needs, but they also used animals, as beings, to meet spiritual needs. Many, if not most, preliterate peoples considered animals superior to humans, having magical, even divine powers.

The abiding respect for animals diminished as the means of production changed. Anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence explains that "it is impossible to overestimate the importance of mankind's change from hunter-gatherer to domesticator of plants and animals" (Lawrence 1986: 46). The survival of hunter-gatherers meant that they could not overexploit the environment on which they depended. In contrast, the transition to farming required a conquering attitude toward the natural world. The farmer engages in continual battle with nature by eliminating plants and animals that have been labeled as "weeds" and "pests." The farmer also manipulates water and the reproduction of crops. The success of settled, agricultural civilizations required an attitude of domination, justified through beliefs that animals were not only "others," but also inferiors (see Thomas 1983; Tuan 1984; Franklin 1999). "Progress" required human communities to define the natural world (and its non-human animals) "as fundamentally different and ontologically separate" from their own (Wolch 1998: 121).^{vi}

One subject that sociologists understand is power. We know that when a group has it, the members will not give it up without a fight. Thus, we humans are reluctant to admit the similarities we share with other animals. As a discipline, sociology emerged to point out how humans were not only different from what Mead regularly refers to as the "lower animals," but they were also better. Humans, after all, had

culture, society, religion, tools, and most important, language. The anthropocentric bias in the discipline has loosened its grip only slightly; overall, the belief that humans are not only unique still reigns. This is so even when ample research on animal behavior asserts otherwise. A slight digression will allow me to make this point.

Janet and Steven Alger (2003b) reviewed thirty major introductory sociology textbooks on the market as of December 2001. The Algers investigated how animals were constructed in the texts and how well the texts integrated newer research on animals that would allow the discipline to move beyond Mead. Introductory texts very often serve as students' first and most formative exposure to sociology. The Algers found that "with few exceptions, the main function of the treatment of animals in these texts is to affirm the hard line that sociology has always drawn between humans and other species" (Alger and Alger *ibidem*: 1). In addition, they found that the discipline "has not offered an adequate response to the new knowledge of animal behavior accumulated over the past twenty years" (Alger and Alger *ibidem*: 83-84). One of the best examples comes from the texts' ubiquitous chapters on culture.

All of the textbooks we reviewed had a chapter or section devoted to human culture and all of the authors defined human culture in essentially the same way. Culture is a 'design or blueprint for living,' a 'way of life,' or a 'social heritage.' Culture is learned, it is shared, and it is passed on to the next generation. The elements of culture offered by these authors were also very similar and included beliefs, values, norms, symbols, language, customs, technology, knowledge and material objects. And, the tremendous diversity of cultures among different human groupings constituted the evidence that culture is a human creation, and not biologically determined. When these same authors turned their attention to the question of animals and culture, however, several problems immediately became apparent. (Alger and Alger *ibidem*: 72)

The first problem was one of poor scholarship. Most of the texts made claims about animals and culture (or more often, the lack of) without references, indicating that "many authors believed their views on animal culture were so well established that no source was necessary or that comments about animals were not of sufficient importance to warrant serious research" (Alger and Alger *ibidem*: 72). In the absence of references, authors ignored solid research asserting that numerous species of animals are indeed capable of developing culture (e.g., Alger and Alger 1999, 2003a on cats; Dawkins 1998; Goodall 1986 on chimpanzees; Pepperberg 1991 on parrots; Thomas 1993, 1994 on dogs and cats; Whiten *et al.* 1999 on chimpanzees).

The second problem concerned the evidence cited in the texts. The Algers explain that "if the authors were asking whether animals have culture, then, just as they did with humans, they needed to look at research that compares separate groupings of the same species to see if they had developed different solutions to the everyday problems of living" (Alger and Alger 2003b: 73). Only two texts cited this sort of evidence; most simply mentioned tool use among animals without seeking studies that investigated the variation in behavior that indicates culture. Eaton's (1976) study of macaques, native to Japan, who were transported to Oregon offers a good example. In Japan, where the colony occupied a large area, the adult males lived apart from females and their offspring. When juvenile male macaques got into fights, the mothers intervened because of proximity. Consequently, in Japan, the mother macaques' fighting ability influenced male dominance. However, in Oregon, the colony had less space, and the adult males lived with it. Males intervened in fights because they were close by, eliminating the females' role in the establishment

of male dominance. Similarly, Marler and Tamura (1964) found geographic variation in the songs of sparrows. In short, the research on animals uses the term “culture” to describe cases “in which one community can be readily distinguished from another by its unique suite of behavioral characteristics” (de Waal 1999). However, sociologists still cling to only one capacity in the “suite,” which is language.^{vii}

Disparagement and denial of animals’ capacities also posed a problem in introductory texts. Even when authors acknowledged that animals had some form of culture, they took pains to elevate human expressions. To offer an illustrative case, one text instructs readers that “humans are not unique just because they make and use tools. However, the tools that humans make are unequalled in complexity. Think of the difference between using a twig to catch termites and making an automobile” (Andersen and Taylor 2002: 63). In most texts, the cultural “ante was raised such that it was necessary to have high culture to be considered as having a culture worthy of the name” (Alger and Alger 2003a: 75).

I used the Algiers’ research on textbooks to make a point. The failure to recognize culture among animals presents an analytic parallel to the failure to recognize self. One only needs to examine the research to learn that the evidence exists. The failure to look for and recognize the evidence not only signifies entrenched anthropocentrism, it also hints at disciplinary arrogance. This stems from the fear that including animals in the conversation about selfhood will somehow diminish human uniqueness. Acknowledging animal selfhood will mean we have to change not only the way we think about them, but the way we treat them. Most tellingly, the failure to recognize self leads to a refusal to enter the conversation about the moral standing of animals. I suggest that this is the most frightening aspect of animal selfhood for sociologists. As Jerolmack warns, the study of animal selfhood could result in human-animal studies “being dismissed as a thinly veiled, institutionalized branch of the animal rights movement (Jerolmack 2005: 651).

On first reading this, I thought of the comparison in human terms. Those who study race and ethnicity do not have to defend themselves against charges that they are supporting civil rights. Those who study gender inequality are not dismissed as feminists. However, we who study animals risk being disparaged and dismissed out of hand. This is speciesism, and it points to how the question of animal selfhood is relevant for the discipline.

Conclusion

The benefits to sociology from including animals in its studies have been amply documented by others. Clifton Bryant’s now classic paper on “The Zoological Connection” (1979) outlines numerous potential avenues for sociological study. Bryant mentions, among others, the prevalence of animal metaphors in our language, animal imagery, artifacts, and labels in our material culture, animals as social problems, animals and work, and zoological crime. Arnold Arluke’s research on animal experimentation and cruelty (e.g., 1988, 1989, 1991, 2004, 2006) reveals that the study of cruelty in its social context provides valuable insights into how the discipline and the culture at-large defines cruelty and determines what to do about it. Clifton Flynn’s groundbreaking research on the role of animals in domestic violence concurs that “animal cruelty is a social phenomenon,” requiring sociological study to counter decades of psychological framing (2001: 74; see also 1999a, b, 2000a,b,c). The work of Steven and Janet Alger, discussed in this paper, expands the sociological understanding of culture. Research by Clinton Sanders and Leslie Irvine,

also discussed here, broadens sociological theories of the mind and the self. These scholars, and others, have demonstrated that including animals in sociological research can only improve the discipline. My intention here is not to reinvent this wheel by providing yet more examples of how animals can enrich our knowledge. Rather, I want to emphasize that enriched knowledge brings increased responsibility. The question is not only, “what can animals do for sociology?” It is also one of “what can sociology do for animals?” Knowledge without practice simply highlights the question posed by Alfred McClung Lee (1978): “Sociology for Whom?” After several decades of systematic sociological research on interaction with non-human animals, it is time to put those research findings into practice. In the context of this paper, research that documents the accomplishment of selfhood among animals carries the obligation to recognize animals’ moral standing.

Mead recognized a relationship between selfhood and moral standing, and explained the implications of a lack of self in this way:

We put personalities into the animals, but they do not belong to them; and ultimately we realize that those animals have no rights. We are at liberty to cut off their lives; there is no wrong committed when an animal's life is taken away. He has not lost anything because the future does not exist for the animal; he has not the ‘me’ in his experience which by the response of the ‘I’ is in some sense under his control, so that the future can exist for him. (Mead [1934]1962: 183)

Quite simply, if animals cannot see themselves as objects, then they have no sense of what happens as happening to *them*, as individuals. Here, as in other instances, Mead’s logic is outdated. Ample evidence shows that the future *does* exist for at least some species of animals. To be sure, it does not exist for them in the same sense as it does for human beings. We make elaborate plans for the future, imagining what we might do or become. Animals’ lives pose no need for them to engage in this kind of planning. However, research shows that many animals do hold expectations, which is a solid indicator of having an idea of what the future might hold. For example, Bekoff’s (1995) extensive research on canine play behavior reveals that dogs hold expectations. He found that some dogs “appear surprised when their play signals are responded to with aggression—they seem to expect that play will follow” (Allen and Bekoff 1997: 154; see also Lorenz 1953). Hunting, storing food, and building nests are all evidence that animals make plans for the future. Research has not yet determined whether animals take these actions instinctually or whether they actually think ahead. In the absence of reliable studies, it would be premature to assert that animals lack the ability to engage in planning. If the future exists for animals, then animals can see themselves as objects. If animals can see themselves as objects, then they have selves. If they have selves, then there are significant implications for the way we treat them and for their status in society.

The history of the discipline illustrates that simply including members of a marginalized group is not in itself transformative, either for the discipline or for the members of the group. For example, what is called the “add women and stir” approach, which merely incorporated women into existing scholarship, did little to challenge institutionalized sexism. However, feminist scholars (e.g., Smith 1990; Andersen and Collins 1992) made it clear that knowledge about women was embedded in material and social structures of power. Once women had a voice from their own standpoint, sociological knowledge was transformed *and transformative*. Because it addressed existing systems of sexist oppression from the standpoint of

those who experienced the effects of that oppression, knowledge gained in this way could begin to challenge sexism.

Scholars have pointed out that oppression seldom exists in isolation. As Nibert puts it, “the arrangements that lead to various forms of oppression are intricately woven together in such a way that the exploitation of one group frequently augments and compounds the mistreatment of others” (Nibert 2003: 6). Sociology has developed the tools to study sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. However, the discipline has not yet challenged speciesism, which philosophers and others have compared to sexism and racism (see Singer [1975] 2002; Regan 1982; Speigel 1986). As Arluke points out, the neglect of animals in sociology “is strikingly ironic, given the discipline’s willingness in recent years to consider the plight of virtually every human minority” (Arluke 2003: 26, 2002). Several factors have led to this neglect. The first is the fear of or skepticism toward equating animals with humans. The increasing knowledge about the emotional and cognitive capacities of animals threatens the way sociologists have defined the social world (see Arluke 2003; Kruse 2003). If we come to believe that animals have selves, and therefore deserve at least some moral standing, the interests of animals will deserve equal consideration. Put differently, the recognition that humans and animals are more similar than they are different challenges sociology’s view that humans are sufficiently unique to merit their own field of study. To be sure, humans are indeed unique. But we need not deny that humans have special capacities in order to extend that recognition to animals, as well. Humans have gone to the moon, but a dog can be trained to sniff out cancer or bombs. Human uniqueness or superiority alone is not a sufficient argument for depriving animals of moral consideration. In any case, most of us would disagree that “might makes right.” However, this is the basis of our disciplinary neglect of non-human animals. Sociology can reveal what underpins the assumptions of human superiority. It can explore what makes it possible for people to think of some animals as food and others as family members. It can also explore the economic, political, and religious structures that uphold speciesism, even as other forms of oppression are regularly challenged.

The second reason that more sociologists have not incorporated non-human animals into our work is that it makes some of us uncomfortable. The majority of sociologists, like the majority of people, in general, prefer not to think about the ways that they are implicated in the abuse of animals. Put more simply, studying the oppression of animals makes us feel guilty. Exploring speciesism makes one aware of the oppression of animals and one’s own role in the process. Simply by eating meat and wearing leather, one is condoning institutionalized practices that cause an enormous amount of suffering to animals. This awareness also occurs when studying gender inequality, racism, homophobia, ageism, and other forms of discrimination. The resulting experience of consciousness-raising can be difficult to ignore.

Finally, some might argue that when one considers all the problems in the world, sociologists should devote our considerable research energies to solving some of the significant human issues. Poverty, environmental degradation, homelessness, war, and the threat of terrorism are all high on the social agenda. Some would argue that they are more pressing than the well-being of animals. The flaw in this argument is that all problems are connected, and the segmenting of issues is both illogical and morally questionable. For example, the moral status of animals as property justifies institutionalized cruelty on the basis that we humans can use them as we see fit. The ideology of superiority, coupled with “might makes right,” also underpins sexism, racism, and homophobia.

In sum, sociologists cannot ignore the issue of the moral status of animals simply by claiming that we have more important work to do on other issues. That is akin to saying that one has chosen to ignore sexism to better engage in opposition to war. The ideological assumptions that uphold our oppression of animals are well within the realm of sociological study. Animals deserve to be members of the moral community because they share our interests in not suffering. They have interests in not suffering because, like us, they can see themselves as objects. They have selves. The implications are too important for sociology to ignore.

Endnotes

- i The notion of the self as a product of evolution has significant implications for sociological concepts. For example, if we accept the evolutionary account of the self, then we also deny that the self can be an illusion or a story, because natural selection works only on the heritable components of traits.
- ii For additional discussions of Mead's oversights regarding animals, see Irvine 2003; Konecki 2005.
- iii For another account of this instance, see Bekoff 2002: 86.
- iv For another discussion of this passage from Mead, see Konecki 2005
- v The finding that dogs perform better than great apes is relevant for animal rights because it defies the logic of the Great Ape Project, which seeks to include in the community of equals all great apes (human beings, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) based on considerable cognitive (and other) similarities.
- vi Anthropocentrism was forever validated when Judaism, Islam, and Christianity endorsed its strong form, known as *dominionism*, or a divine right to rule over nature. Some Biblical scholars claim that interpretations of the Hebrew that justify using animals as we please misrepresent the original Hebrew. Alternative interpretations translate the original as "stewardship," a form of anthropocentrism conveying a "God-given responsibility to care for the earth" (Linzey 1998, 287), rather than granting the right to rule over it (see also Cohen 1989).
- vii Along similar lines, evidence that meerkats teach their young about hunting appeared in the journal *Science* 14 July 2006: (Vol. 313 no. 5784: 227 – 229). The authors point out that "the lack of evidence for teaching in species other than humans may reflect problems in producing unequivocal support for the occurrence of teaching, rather than the absence of teaching." (p. 227)

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