

Animals, Humans, and Society: Human-Animal Interaction. A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This habilitation thesis has two parts. In the first part, I shall provide a brief overview of my academic and research interests in sociology, with an emphasis on current contribution to the development of a research area still at the beginning in our country: human-animal interaction. In the second part, I will present three of the studies on human-animal interaction and relationship, and the plans for future research which include the analysis of these issues in a much broader scientific framework. In the first study entitled “Animals, Humans, and Society. Human-Animal Interaction”, I have analyzed the way the historical, cultural and social interaction between humans and animals occurs. A central focus of this discourse is on the expression of the emotions in man and animals, as well as on the role that animals have in people’s lives. Further, the discussed concepts were anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism and zoomorphism. In the second study, entitled “The Responsibility Towards Animals and Animal-Assisted Therapy”, the topics approached refers to the use of animals for scientific purposes and the legislation for animal protection, animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities and positive and negative aspects of our relationship with nonhuman animals, particularly with companion animals. The third study, named “Attachment, Grief, and Loss of an Animal Companion” is focused on the connection between humans and animals: human-animal bond. In this respect, several characteristics of the pet-owner relationship are identified. Attachment, grief and loss of an animal companion represent the key elements. In this regard, it should be noted that in many societies the grieving process following the death of an animal companion is not socially recognized (*disenfranchised grief*). In the following, I shall make some considerations on the importance of human-animal studies and the perspective sociology offers in this regard.

Today, *Animals and Society* is considered a branch of sociology (Irvine, 2008). Some researchers and scholars included this concept even in the title of their works (e.g., DeMello, 2012; Taylor, 2013). The term of *zoological connection* proposed by Clifton D. Bryant in his study published in 1979 in order to show the importance of integrating studies on animals in sociology and also in other fields of study, didnot remain without an echo in the years that followed. The lack of interest of sociologists in studying human-animal interaction determined Clifton D. Bryant (1979, 399) to characterize them as “myopic in their observations of human behavior, cultural patterns, and social relationships”. Sociology’s “glitches” are also observed by other researchers and scientists. For example, Corwin R. Kruse (2002, 375) was stressing on the idea that “paradoxically by concentrating exclusively on humans we have neglected an enormous facet of human existence.”

In a chapter entitled *The Sociology of Nonhuman Animals and Society* published in 2007, the American sociologist Clinton R. Sanders showed the importance of the sociological perspective in studying human-animal interaction and its social implications,

mentioning that “human interaction with nonhuman animals is a central feature of contemporary social life” (Sanders, 2007, 2). Although sociology overlooked or not considered for a long time this important research component of social life, in the last years this situation changed. Thus, considering the sociological perspective, it was admitted the significant contribution that the study of human-animal interaction should have in analyzing the dynamics of relationships and social interactions. For example, there are studies that support the idea that there is a direct link between our behavior towards animals and the behavior towards our own kind or, better said, towards those whom we consider as part of the “others” (Singer, 1975/2009; Kalof *et al.*, 2004; Adams, 1990; Nibert, 2002). Thus, to the question, “*What makes ‘animal and society’ sociology?*” Leslie Irvine, a sociology professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, answered: “the existence of this specialty area might seem contradictory, for we commonly equate sociology with the study of people, not animals. However, non-human animals contribute so much to what we call ‘society’ that their exclusion from sociology amounts to a glaring omission. Over the past two decades, some sociologists have acknowledged that the inclusion of animals can sharpen and expand sociological insights. Many departments now offer courses on ‘Animals and Society’” (Irvine, 2008, 1955) as well as on human-animal interaction.

Max Weber (1947, 104) admitted the possibility of sociological analysis on the interaction between humans and animals. He noted the following: “it would be possible to formulate a sociology of the relations of men to animals, both domestic and wild. Thus, many animals ‘understand’ commands, anger, love, hostility, and react to them in ways which are evidently often by no means purely instinctive and mechanical and in some sense both consciously meaningful and affected by experience.” Also a notable point of view is expressed by George Herbert Mead (1907). He considers animals to be social beings, but in the same time, limited in terms of social interactions, as they rely more on instinct.

One of the important moments in the development of this specialty is 2002 when, after much debate, a new section of the American Sociological Association entitled *Animals and Society* is to be set up (Irvine, 2008; Kruse, 2002). Four years later, the *Animal/Human Study Group* was formed in the British Sociological Association (York Longo, 2015, 2). In the same time, according to Clinton R. Sanders (2007, 4), studies and researches showing the sociological perspective of human-animal interaction and on relationship between humans and animals appear with regularity in journals such as *Society and Animals*, *Journal of Human-Animal Studies* and *Anthrozoös*. Also, other journals include articles that discuss human-animal interaction perspective: *Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology*, *Sociological Theory*, *Social Forces*, *Sociological Forum*, *Sociologia Ruralis*, *The Sociological Review*, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, *Sociology Compass*, *Marriage and the Family*, *The Journal of Social Issues*, *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* or *Symbolic Interaction* (also see Sanders, 2007, 4). Just like the sociology journals mentioned, several books (e.g., Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Peggs, 2012; Franklin, 1999; Irvine, 2004, 2013; Algers & Algers, 2003) and volumes (Arluke & Sanders, Eds., 2009; Flynn, Ed., 2008; Kalof & Fitzgerald, Eds., 2007) outlines the sociological perspective on interaction between humans and animals. Also, Brill Academic Publishers, Purdue University Press, Temple

University Press constantly publishes works on human-animal relationship. Not only the sociology journals pays special attention to this topic. For example, *Journal of Business Research* devotes a special issue in 2008, its editorial being named, *Animal companions, consumption experiences, and the marketing of pets: Transcending boundaries in the animal-human distinction*, and signed by Morris B. Holbrook and Arch G. Woodside (2008, 377-381), from Columbia University respectively from Boston College. In other journals such as *Death Studies*, *Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping*, *Journal of Family Social Work*, *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, *Social Work*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, published articles are discussing the relationship between humans and animals in terms of psycho-socio-emotional implications. A distinctive character of other studies on human-animal interaction is represented by the issues addressed: abuse against animals and domestic violence (e.g., Flynn, 2001, 1999a, b, 2000a, b, c).

Considering sociological perspective on *Animals and Society*, finally, I shall present two very important points of view in understanding the role that animals play in our lives. According to Leslie Irvine (2009, 372), “non-human animals constitute an integral part of human society. They figure heavily in our language, food, clothing, family structure, economy, education, entertainment, science, and recreation. The many ways we use animals produce ambivalent and contradictory attitudes toward them.” Last but not least, Arluke Arnold (2010, 35) believes that “animals are windows for understanding ourselves.” From them we can learn about “emotions, feelings, expectations, fears”, life, behavior, environment, essentially about what is called “social order” (quoted in Irvine, 2012, s128).

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