

Lynn, William S. 2007. Human-Animal Studies, in Marc Bekoff (editor) *Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships*. Westport: Greenwood Press, forthcoming.

## Human-Animal Studies

Human-animal studies (HAS) is the interdisciplinary study of human-animal relations. At times referred to as animal studies, animal humanities, critical animal studies or anthrozoology, it examines the complex interactions between the worlds of human and other animals. There are several features of HAS that are important for this article.

First, HAS is a young discipline and one of the fastest growing areas of research in the academy. Its growth to date is akin to that of environmental studies in the latter decades of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, HAS is primarily located in established disciplines as either an official or *de facto* sub-field. For example, one can find HAS courses, research and/or special interest groups in a variety of the social and interdisciplinary sciences, such as anthropology, geography, political science, psychology, and sociology (to name a few). HAS is equally well represented in the arts and humanities, such as the fine arts, cultural studies, history, literature, philosophy and religious studies (to name a few more). HAS has also institutionalized itself through journals (e.g. *Anthrozoos*; *Society and Animals*), book series (e.g. Brill; Temple University Press; Columbia University Press), international societies and online networks (e.g. International Society of Anthrozoology; Nature in Legend and Story e-network), as well as policy institutes that use the fruits of scholarship (e.g. Institute for Society and Animals). The proliferation of HAS opens up social and conceptual space for the creation and use of academic publications and ensures its long-term viability in higher education. HAS is also emerging as the focus of undergraduate minors and majors in colleges and universities across the world. Currently, the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Tufts University offers the only graduate-level program where students can engage in human-animal studies full-time.

Second, HAS emerged in response to three problematic ways of understanding animals. The first is the failure of the natural and behavioural sciences to adequately address the sentience, sapience and agency of many animals. The second is the recognition of anthropocentrism and speciesism as prejudicial paradigms that distort our moral relationship with other people, animals and the rest of nature. The third is a burgeoning interest in the cultural, social and political place of animals in human societies. A clarion response to these problems was the publication of two books by Mary Midgley – *Beast and Man* (1978) and *Animals and Why They Matter* (1984). Both texts were motivated in part as responses to the ethical and scientific blinders of behaviourism, genetic determinism and sociobiology. Midgley is arguably the field's most celebrated scholar, and her incisive critiques of ethical, philosophical and scientific themes inspired scholars to consider the animal question as a serious subject of study.

Third, the interdisciplinarity of HAS produces a wealth of theories, methods and topics. Scholars have approach HAS from diverse theoretical positions, ranging from empiricism and positivism, to post-colonialism and ecofeminism. They undertake their studies using qualitative, quantitative, mixed and other methodologies. And their topics touch on wild, companion, farm and research animals. While this plurality generates a vibrant dialogue that should be praised, it can also obscure fundamentally different approaches to ethics, science and society. This is becoming something of an unacknowledged struggle for HAS, as positivists and anti-positivists begin to clash in conferences,

faculty meetings, seminars and publications. This is to be expected as the positivist claim to undertaking value-free and objective science is widely discredited, and the anti-positivist alternatives represent such a diversity of theoretical and methodological points-of-departure that it is both impossible and undesirable to establish a unitary point-of-view. HAS is laden with incommensurable points-of-view on naturalistic versus humanistic models of science, quantitative versus qualitative methodologies, and value-free versus value-forming scholarship. These clashes have not become the primary focus of debate as of yet, but bear watching as sources of rough weather.

Fourth, like any academic field with environmental and/or social relevance, there is an ongoing tension between scholarship and activism. The perspectives of activists for animal welfare, protection or rights are a source of inspiration and insight to the academy and society alike. Yet scholarship and activism are neither identical nor inseparable. Some scholars and students have precommitments to animal social movements, and for reasons of academic freedom and social relevance, this is well and good. Even so, the intellectual requirement of social movements frequently engenders dogmatic approaches to moral and political problems. This may serve advocates well as they mobilize support for their positions. It is antithetical, however, to the best norms of scholarship that aspire to theoretical and methodological rigour, or the plurality of subject matter that may not be popular in activist circles. The trick to managing this tension is not to privilege one concern and discourse over one another, but allow each to inform and challenge the other.

Fifth, HAS will face crucial challenges in the years ahead. One such challenge has to do with its legitimacy in the academy. HAS (broadly understood) is of obvious interest to a great many people. The popularity of nature videos, animal-focused ecotourism, bird-watching and the like are well-established. So too is the emergence over the past decade of 'animal art' as a subject for study and creation. Interesting, I was told several years ago by a curator at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England that animal art was for children and not the a fitting subject for serious study. Even so, HAS is likely to receive a cool reception in many established disciplines. The reasons for this will vary, but will include:

- hostility towards animals as a serious subject of study;
- fears that interdisciplinary fields like HAS diminish students and resources for established departments;
- theoretical imperialism and the distaste for upstart disciplines that do not toe the theoretical line;
- advocacy concerns that a focus on the well-being of animals will detract from the well-being of humans; and
- censorship by university administrators who fear HAS will jeopardize corporate and government sources of funding.

HAS will have to face all these concerns directly if its efforts at institutionalizing itself are to avoid being undermined by ivory tower politics.

Another challenge has to do with creating a global learning community out of interdisciplinary plurality. HAS draws insights from many disciplines, theories, methods, topics and experiences. These insights are drawn not only from North America or the animal protection movement, but from places and identity groups across the globe. The globalization of HAS will likely continue in the years ahead. This then raises questions about how academics and others learn to generate a body of knowledge that is open to a wide diversity of perspectives, without lapsing into a lazy relativism about knowledge-claims or moral norms. Grappling with the problem of relativism – and its

opposite, objectivism – will likely require an ongoing debate over the status of situated knowledge in both science and ethics. It will also require ongoing attention to the fora for dialogue that creates the possibility for such knowledge.

Finally, it bears mentioning that this encyclopedia and its companions (i.e. *Encyclopedia of Animal Welfare and Animal Rights*; *Encyclopedia of Animal Behavior*) are the largest single compilation of HAS research and writing to date. This is a significant achievement for their editor, Marc Bekoff, and his colleagues to be sure. It is also a testament to the growing interest in human-animal studies.

**See also**        Animals and Public Policy

**Further Resources**

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