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IF LIONS COULD SPEAK: Investigating the Animal-Human Relationship and the Perspectives of Nonhuman Others

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Though they have not tended to be the focus of sociological attention in the past, interactions between humans and nonhuman animals are central to contemporary social life. This discussion presents the problems inherent in and the unique rewards offered by investigations of animal-human relationships. Of particular importance are the issues of whether one can and how one goes about assuming the perspective of a lingual and/or nonhuman others. We also examine the inclination to intervene which arises when researchers gain intimate familiarity with animal perspectives in the typically unequal contexts in which they interact with humans. General issues of central sociological and social significance upon which the study of animal-human relationships can potentially shed light are identified.

In his 1979 presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society, Clifton Bryant criticized sociologists for not attending to the relationships between animals and humans. He noted that:

[s]ociologists . . . have often been myopic in their observations of human behavior, cultural patterns, and social relationships, and unfortunately have not taken into account the permeating social influence of animals in our larger cultural fabric, and our more idiosyncratic individual modes of interaction and relationships, in their analyses

or social life. With very few exceptions, the sociological literature is silent on this topic (Bryant 1979, p. 400).

Since Bryant's advocacy of a "zoological focus," however, few have heeded his call. Sociologists, generally, have displayed a remarkable reluctance to examine the wider realm of human relationships which lies beyond the conventional boundaries of human-to-human exchanges (for exceptions see, Cohen 1989; Johnson 1988; Turkle 1984). To a considerable degree, this reluctance appears to be due to sociology's phonocentric empha-

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The Sociological Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 3, pages 377-390.

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ISSN: 0038-0253.

The Sociological Quarterly © 1993 Midwest Sociological Society

Abstract

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