

Animals and Society Institute



**Human-Animal Studies:
Growing the Field, Applying the Field**

Kenneth Joel Shapiro

The Animals and Society Institute is an independent research and educational organization that advances the status of animals in public policy and promotes the study of human-animal relationships. We are a think tank as well as a producer of educational resources, publications and events. Our objectives are to promote new and stricter animal protection laws, stop the cycle of violence between animal cruelty and human abuse, and learn more about our complex relationship with animals.

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1. Human-Animal Studies: Growing the Field, Applying the Field

Executive Summary

Human-Animal Studies (HAS) is a newly emerging field of scholarship that has the potential to provide an important tool for the development of policy related to the status and use of nonhuman animals. Defining this multidisciplinary field by its devotion to the investigation of human-animal relationships, we examine its scope, theoretical base, methodology, and status in post-secondary school curricula.¹

HAS is the only field that directly investigates relationships between human and nonhuman animals and their environment. The forms of bonds, attachments, interactions, and communications under investigation are impressively variable because of (1) the number of species of nonhuman animals, (2) the ingenious (and often exploitative) ways that humans have used other animals, and (3) the ways that humans view other animals. These latter views also have played a critical role in the complex and often contradictory ways that we compare ourselves to them. The different names of the current field reveal these contradictions in their disregard of the fact that humans are also animals.¹

One approach to uncovering these complexities in human-animal relationships is to distinguish between the animal as such and the animal as constructed. Our views of nonhuman animals in general and of a particular species or class of animals are often prejudiced and anthropocentric, consisting of layers of ideological and linguistic biases that serve only human interests. By unraveling and examining the layers of these social constructions, scholars reveal, as much as that is possible, the animal as such – the animal seen and related to directly and without prejudice. This fresh view can inform policies that regulate our treatment of nonhuman animals in ways that enhance human-animal relationships for all of them and us.¹

It follows that the development of HAS is a meta-policy issue. Although scholarly production (articles, books, and journals) in HAS has grown impressively in the past two decades, institutional infrastructure (minors,

majors, and programs) has lagged behind. This structure is critical to increasing the presence, prominence, and, therefore, impact on policies related to our treatment of nonhuman animals.

Blocks to the growth of institutional infrastructure include the traditional disciplinary structure of universities, human-centered research funding priorities, and prejudices against nonhuman animals – all of which give less priority to a multidisciplinary field that gives significant attention to nonhuman animals.

As the field develops, it is important that it retain its reliance on rigorous, evidence-based scholarship. Philosophy of science has shown that, the regulative ideal of objectivity notwithstanding, research is colored by the values, socio-political context, and personality of the investigator. Although HAS is necessarily a value-informed enterprise, it can retain its credibility and elevate the level of discussion for both animal advocates and proponents of the status quo by assiduously adhering to traditional criteria of good scholarship.

2. Introduction to the Field

Human-Animal Studies (HAS) provides a potentially powerful tool for the development of policy related to the status and use of nonhuman animals. Other papers in the present Animals and Society Institute (ASI) Policy Papers Series argue for policy changes on such particular animal issues as the welfare of elephants in zoos (Bradshaw, 2007), disaster planning that includes companion animals (Irvine, 2007), and “dangerous dog” legislation (Bradley, 2006). In doing so, they often apply selected literature from the emerging multidisciplinary field of HAS.

This paper is largely a discussion of a meta-policy issue, as it does not argue for policy changes directly related to nonhuman animals. However, actions that increase the prospects of HAS and lower barriers to its development themselves constitute a policy initiative. If the field were stronger, then its power as a tool for the development of policies in animal-issues would be greater. What policies – regulations, legislation, and institutional changes – would enhance the power of HAS?

This paper examines the field itself: its scope, theoretical base, methodology, and status within the literatures of the various other established disciplines. What are its scholarly achievements to date? In addition to these aspects of its intellectual infrastructure, we critically examine the state of the field institutionally. To what degree has it become institutionalized – found a home in universities and colleges in devoted courses, minors, majors, and degree programs? What are the politics of its acceptance or rejection within the university? What are the prospects for and barriers to HAS playing a constructive role in changing the ways we as a society choose to relate to and treat nonhuman animals?

3. Defining the Field

Scholars define HAS through its subject matter, not by any single methodological approach. The field is primarily devoted to examining, understanding, and critically evaluating the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between human and other animals. What are the various ways in which nonhuman animals figure in our lives and we in theirs? The relationships can be real or symbolic, factual or fictional, historical or contemporary, and, most importantly in the context of policy-making, beneficial or detrimental to one or both parties.

The key term in this definition is “relationship.” HAS is the only field that directly investigates relationships between human and nonhuman animals and their environment – the impressively variable forms of bonds, attachments, interactions, and communications. Other fields investigate one or another aspect of human being or of the being of nonhuman animals. In doing so, they often speak of the “relation between” the being of individuals of one species to that of another. Although these similarities and differences limit the possible forms of human-animal relationships, they are themselves not descriptive of those relationships. For example, ethology (a subfield of zoology) and comparative psychology investigate the behavior of nonhuman animals, but only rarely and incidentally human-animal relationships. With respect to HAS, they are related or even foundational fields – as chemistry is to biology – but they are not part of HAS proper. Neither *Society and Animals* nor *Anthrozoös*, two quarterly, peer-reviewed journals devoted to HAS, would publish a study investigating the mating habits of chimpanzees or even one comparing those habits to those of humans.

That, at present, HAS defines itself exclusively by its subject matter distinguishes it from many other fields that are “disciplines” in the sense that they constrain research to certain rules of procedure or methods. That situation may change as HAS scholars modify existing methods from various other fields to encompass the animal side of such relationships and/or develop unique methods for the study of human-animal relationships. A prior question is whether policy related to the status of nonhuman animals would develop more effectively with HAS as a separate field or through assimilation into other existing fields. Women’s and African-American Studies have faced similar quandaries, e.g., is it more effective for the re-evaluation of the status of women to develop a robust and independent field, Women’s Studies, or to bring the role of women from the margins into the main body of existing texts in the field of history?

4. Naming the Field

Arguably, the launch of HAS occurred in 1987 with the inaugural issue of *Anthrozoös*. Since then the field has been known (as if it were an outlaw) by several aliases: Anthrozoölogy, Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Animals and Society Studies, Humanimalia, and, the name we prefer here, Human-Animal Studies. This difficulty in settling on the most apt handle reflects deeper issues regarding the status of nonhuman animals – issues which, in turn, redound to acceptance and progress of the field that deals with our relationships to them.

In common usage, the term “animal” refers to all animals except humans despite the fact that (as we recall from our introductory biology course) humans are also animals. This manifest category error is found in most of the terms for HAS and in the name of most of the devoted journals, including *Anthrozoös*, *Society and Animals*, the *Journal of Animals and Society*, the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, *Nature in Legend and Story*, and *Antennae* and in listservs in the field, Humananimalstudies Group and H-Animal Network. In this context, saying Human-Animal Studies is as incoherent as saying “tomatoes and vegetables.” Less obviously, the neologism *Anthrozoös* (from “anthro” [man] and “zoos” [animals]) commits the same error, plus an analogous sexist error (man for human).

More than semantics is at stake here, for these categorical errors have historical roots in philosophical and religious ideas that formed the foundation of Western culture and ensured a subordinate and inferior status for nonhuman animals. When we use terms like Human-Animal Studies for the field, we can be perceived as perpetuating this received view and undercutting the possibility, arguably inherent in the development of this field, of providing a more progressive and respectful public policy for our treatment of nonhuman animals.

Changing linguistic usage established over centuries is a difficult and slow task: witness contemporary efforts to correct the categorical error embodied in the use of “man” to refer to both men and women. That term valorizes one gender to the detriment of the other, which then becomes the subordinate or “second sex.”

A number of scholars and activists in the animal protection movement have analyzed the history and current usage that helps sustain the subordination of nonhuman animals. Kemmerer (2006) has suggested the neologism “anymal” to refer to an animal of any species other than the speaker’s. With this term, the field under discussion is Human-Anymal Studies, where anymal refers to all nonhuman animals and human unambiguously is also an animal.

It is clear that a satisfactory name for the field awaits popular recognition of the category error as a problem. We take the position that Human-Animal Studies is the best name at this time because it highlights the contradictions in current usage while retaining the emphasis on human-animal relationships. We reject the term “Animal Studies” since, in current usage in biology, psychology, and biomedicine, it refers to investigations that attempt to use nonhuman animals to create models of targeted human phenomena and is distinct from the study of human-animal relationships. Consistent with this view, HAS scholars in the humanities – far afield from the natural sciences and, hence, from possible confusion – often use the term Animal Studies, while many social scientists do not.

5. Complexities in the Field

5.1 Animals as such and animals as constructed

Both human and nonhuman animals have capabilities that limit the forms of their relationships within and across species. These capabilities and the inclination to exercise them vary greatly by species, individual, and environment. In turn, science is limited in what it can learn about both the capabilities and the relationships. These limitations reflect both our investigatory tools and the special problems of gaining access to the lives and experience of beings who, although they communicate, do not speak our language without extensive training and then only with modest proficiency.

This begins to suggest the complexity of the problem of studying human-animal relationships. In addition to the understanding that science gives us, our relations to animals are influenced by the complex ways we as a society view them. These views derive from our philosophical, religious, and political ideologies and the various ways we treat animals, as well as what we glean from scientific literature. Scholars in the humanities and some social scientists refer to these views, attitudes, images, and uses as “social constructions.” We as a society assemble animals out of our views and uses. For these scholars, science’s view and use of animals is merely one of these many social constructs. However, in this paper we draw a distinction between “animals as constructed” and “animals as such,” where the latter refers to animals as they live and experience the world independently of our constructions of them.

Historically and currently, we have adopted many different attitudes and images toward animals that limit and influence the forms of our relationships with them. We have various images of wolves – the child-molesting wolf of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the vermin who eats the ranchers’ sheep, and the romantic wilderness icon constructed by environmentalists. These several constructions of wolves refer to an existing species of wild animal whose natural history has not changed much. No doubt wolves are more wary of us and, because of us, their numbers have been reduced dramatically. But we also construct novel *types* of animals each of which can include many different species of

animals who are farmed, confined to zoos, kept as companions, used as workers, and made to perform in circuses. Although wolves also have been affected by the various ways of constructing “wilderness,” these other classes of animals live radically different lives than did their progenitors because of the ways we raise and selectively or genetically breed them. Because we domesticated them and now intensively confine them, chickens, a “farm animal,” have limited capability for flight and are the most abundant bird species in the world. Once viewed as pestilence carriers, black and brown rats have been bred to be timid, malleable, and sanitized white rats – a “laboratory animal.”

We are confronted, then, with animals as such – animals as they naturally evolved – and animals as socially constructed, which includes artificial selection, genetic engineering, and systematic forms of socialization.

5.2 Deconstruction

Taken together, this complex of constructions influences the form of our relationship to individuals of a particular species of animal. Typically, it deforms that relationship – limiting it in ways it does not need to be limited. Consider our relation to intensively confined chickens used for the production of meat (Davis, 1996). We view these animals as commodities, not as individual beings; our relation to them is comparable to that of our relation to a corn stalk. Yet we might form a relationship with a chicken that would be a genuine attachment, grieved in its loss, and characterized by the individual autonomy, agency, and personality of that animal in interaction with our own.

Other constructions are mixed in that they both limit and expand the forms of our relationships with individuals of a species. Consider our relationship with working, service, and companion dogs as compared to that of our relationship with wolves, their progenitor species.

Scholars in the humanities and social scientists who use interpretative (as distinguished from strictly empirical) approaches refer to the task of understanding how human-animal relations have been deformed through our social construction of them as “deconstruction.” One of the tasks of HAS is to deconstruct or unpack these layers of construction to reveal the potential for more robust or at least more natural forms of

human-animal relationships. In this way, HAS is comparable to fields that study other oppressed groups. A feminist scholar deconstructs relationships involving women in history, fiction, and in current institutions to reveal the typically degraded role of women – how they have been objectified, reduced to sexual objects or help-mates, and denied full legal, economic, and political standing. Both feminist studies and HAS play a role in the social justice movements dedicated to ending discrimination against the respective oppressed group. We discuss the relation of HAS to advocacy below.

Pit bulls exemplify a recently constructed oppressed animal. The currently popular view of them as “dangerous dogs” is largely a construction in two ways. From a taxonomic point of view, pit bulls do not exist (Bradley, 2006). Although we have selectively bred dogs to attack certain predators, the animals we call pit bulls do not fit neatly into any of the breeds or races resulting from this selective breeding. Secondly, despite popular perception, pit bulls are not responsible for more attacks on humans than other dog breeds. Herzog (2006) describes how historically we have viewed different breeds (true breeds or not) as the “dangerous dog of the day.” But clearly the current view of pit bulls greatly influences the way we relate to them. For example, some adolescents use possession of a pit bull to gain respect or enhance their “rep” through threats to and actual assaults on humans and other dogs. Media often sensationalize these events, increasing the perceived frequency of their occurrence and sustaining the social construction. In response, the public and legislators seek remedies such as legislation that restricts behavior of individual animals based on breed. Challenges to such breed-specific legislation have been made and in Ohio, for example, were successful in the lower courts although ultimately the Ohio Supreme Court held that this legislation was constitutional.

The tasks related to studies of the human-pit bull relationship involve describing the relationships developed under the auspices of these social constructions; deconstructing them; and indicating possible human-pit bull relationships based on pit bulls as such. The resulting body of studies could be applied to existing and proposed laws and regulations directed at the problem of dangerous dogs. This literature and its applications would have clear implications and

recommendations for changes in policy.

From this example, the complexity, challenge, and richness of HAS is clear. The deconstruction of the current dominant view of pit-bulls as dangerous dogs is only a first step and it is a problematic one as the construction is multilayered. Beneath the dangerous dog are other constructions: a dog who is a member of a mixed human and nonhuman animal species family; and a dog who could revert to a feral free-roaming pack animal, and, over generations, look more behaviorally and even morphologically like a wild dog or wolf. As these layers are analytically stripped away and deconstructed, the relevance of related fields becomes clear. To understand human-pit bull relationships, we need to be informed by the cognitive ethology of contemporary pit bulls, generic dogs, wild dogs, and wolves, as well as by the psychology of human needs for attachment.

6. The Scope of the Field

Currently within the social sciences and humanities, many traditional academic fields have a core of scholars who study human-animal relationships (Shapiro, 2002). However, other scholars in these same fields, when they occasionally do include nonhuman animals within the scope of their research, study humans and animals without reflecting on the relationships among them and the attitudes that shape and constrain those relationships. For example, a study in anthropology that describes the animal side of a human-animal relationship exclusively in terms of the animal as cultural artifact – his or her value in commerce or ritual use – is not part of HAS. It is possible that a cultural group does relate to an animal in that limited fashion. However, once the investigator is sensitized to the possibility of other forms of human-animal relationships, the role of an animal often is found to be more complex, with features of relationship intermixed with features of both commodification and symbolic value.

Miles describes the role of pigs in Vanuatu, an archipelago northeast of Australia:

Pigs were the essential medium of dowry and pig ownership enhanced men's marital eligibility. Leadership – the status of bigman – is achieved through the accumulation of pigs... Pigs are not esteemed as living beings because they are valued commodities; rather, they possess material value on account of their intrinsic being. Pigs are given personal names for reasons that transcend the anthropomorphic equivalent of pet-naming in Western society: in Melanesia, the pig is considered to have a soul. Pigs are regarded as family members, albeit non-human ones. (Miles, 1997)

Although pigs in traditional Vanuatu society are tokens of power and wealth, they are more than that. Whether or not the role of an animal is limited to cultural artifact, the task of a scholar in a field that has incorporated the subject matter and problematics of HAS is to describe that relationship and its limitations and complexities.

Similarly, a scholar studying literary fiction can investigate the role of an animal in a novel exclusively as a vehicle for understanding something other than human-animal relationships – most often as a symbol of some aspect of a human being. Even in the case where the target work largely restricts the role of animals to a symbolic vehicle, for a literary scholar informed by HAS, the critical task is to describe the human-animal relationships in the work, placing them in the universe of possible relationships: from the most reduced “relationship” (the animal as absent referent – a piece of meat on a plate) to the animal as a more or less equal partner in a relationship--the product of which is a common project or a shared world. An animal-centered literary criticism, then, encompasses three moves: (1) deconstructing reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals; (2) evaluating the degree to which the author presents the animal “in itself” or as such, both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world; and (3) analyzing the human-animal relationships in the work at hand (Shapiro & Copeland, 2005).

As discussed, other fields investigate aspects of humanity or animality directly, without addressing the question of forms of relationships between them. These related fields, such as comparative psychology and ethology, explore the intellectual, emotional, and social organizational capabilities of nonhuman animals. As fields of study that reveal the animal as such beneath social constructions of them, these related fields are important complements to HAS. However, in turn, comparative psychologists and ethologists are influenced by social constructions that operate as biases in their respective fields. Their deconstruction is part of the scope of HAS. For example, Haraway (1989) deconstructs primatology to reveal the social constructions operative in the work of comparative psychologists such as Harlow and his students and the “correction” found in the work of ethologists such as Goodall, Galdikas, and Fossey.

7. Selected Policy Areas and Relevant Studies in the Field

Some HAS studies provide specific data that directly inform a particular policy area (What impact does keeping dogs chained have on human-canine relationships?), while others provide general findings that form the foundation upon which any policy should build (What are the most effective tactics for changing attitudes toward an oppressed group?).

Consider policy involving the abuse of companion animals in the home. The following is a list of studies that provide information about human-canine or human-feline relationships useful in forming a policy to deal effectively with this problem. The discipline of the researchers illustrates the multidisciplinary scope of HAS:

- traditional and contemporary role of companion animals in the family (Grier, 2006; history);
- culturally supported images and roles of companion animals (Mason, 2005; literary studies);
- role of language in supporting or condemning animal abuse (Dunayer, 2001; linguistics/women's studies);
- demographics of both perpetrators and victims of animal abuse (Henry, 2004; psychology);
- police and criminal justice response to complaints of animal abuse (Arluke & Luke, 1997; sociology);
- status of nonhuman animals in the law and existing laws regarding animal abuse (Bryant, 2006; legal studies);
- relation between animal abuse and other forms of violence (Felthous & Kellert, 1986; psychiatry and environmental studies);
- development and evaluation of programs dealing with the problem of animal abuse and other perpetrator-victim violence— e.g., safe havens (Ascione, 2000; psychology);
- humane education (Ascione, 1992; psychology); and
- assessment and treatment of animal abuse (Jory & Randour, 1999; psychology; Lewchanin & Zimmerman, 2000; social work).

This partial list suggests that a progressive policy of dealing with animal abuse in the home should encompass issues in human welfare as well as animal welfare, and implicate practices within and coordination across several stakeholder agencies.

A second example: Consider policy involving elephants in a zoo. Beyond the ethology and natural history of elephants in the wild (animals as such), what can HAS offer that is relevant to such policy? Again, here is a partial list of studies:

- the role of zoos in imperialist regimes (Mullan & Marvin, 1987; postcolonial studies and anthropology);
- the ethics of keeping animals in zoos (Bostock, 1993; philosophy);
- human-elephant relationships in settings in which elephants are captive (Bradshaw, 2007; ecology);
- trauma and other psychological constructs applied to elephants in the wild and captivity (Bradshaw, 2005; psychology);
- human-elephant relationships in other cultural institutions (Hart, 2005; animal behavior);
- enrichment studies of captive elephants, including keeper-animal relationships (Kane, Forthman, & Hancocks, 2005; animal behavior); and
- traditional and future zoos (Hoage and Deiss, 1996; history).

Clearly, policy involving the keeping of elephants must be informed by a wide range of considerations and analyses encompassing many different fields.

8. The Field Itself as a Policy Issue

The number of dissertations in HAS completed in the United States increased in the 1990s compared to the 1980s at a rate beyond the general increase in the number of dissertations (Gerbasi, 2002). By this and other indices of scholarly production – peer-reviewed articles, devoted books, conference series, conferences, and listservs – HAS is a robust emerging multidisciplinary field. However, institutional infrastructure and presence lag behind scholarly production. Although we have about 300 HAS courses in various departments (HSUS/CRLE), we have only one major (Department of Sociology, College of Notre Dame de Namur), a few minors (e.g., University of Redlands) and even fewer programs. The latter are housed in veterinary schools and focus more on animals as such than on human-animal relationships. The school of social work at the University of Denver has the only endowed chair in the U.S. and Michigan State University has a certification program for graduate studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, both established in 2008.

What policies would provide HAS institutional homes comparable to those established for Women's Studies and African-American Studies? The former has at least 650 programs or departments in U.S. institutions (Shapiro, 2002). To fashion policies that will offset them, we first need to identify the impediments to this institutional growth. Many of these blocks are those familiar to us as the foundations of various discriminatory and exploitative practices in our treatment of and relationships to nonhuman animals: tradition, language, and economic interests. In effect, the degraded position of one pole of its subject matter – the animals in human-animal relationships – inhibits a more robust institutional presence for HAS. To remove these impediments we need a radical shift from the current predominant human-centered and speciesist worldview.

At an only relatively more practical level, the structure of academic institutions provides another set of blocks. Universities typically bestow political power and financial resources to traditional disciplines. Areas of study like HAS that cross these departmental lines of organization have difficulty gaining a foothold in this terrain. Universities depend on

external (primarily governmental) funding for developing and maintaining research programs. Fields like HAS that are not directly human-centered have less priority in competing for that research dollar.

Finally, other blocks are peculiar to this field. Commonly used methods of gathering data in the social sciences, such as interviews and surveys, are not possible with animals. The field needs to develop methods that provide access to animals' experience of human-animal relationships. Some existing theories can be adapted to this subject area, others can not. Can the field generate theories uniquely suited to HAS?

9. Advocacy and the Field

The number of dissertations in HAS completed in the United States increased in the 1990s compared to the 1980s at a rate beyond the general increase in the number of dissertations (Gerbas, 2002). By this and other indices of scholarly production – peer-reviewed articles, devoted books, conference series, conferences, and listservs – HAS is a robust emerging multidisciplinary field. However, institutional infrastructure and presence lag behind scholarly production. Although we have about 300 HAS courses in various departments (HSUS/CRLE), we have only one major (Department of Sociology, College of Notre Dame de Namur), a few minors (e.g., University of Redlands) and even fewer programs. The latter are housed in veterinary schools and focus more on animals as such than on human-animal relationships. The school of social work at the University of Denver has the only endowed chair in the U.S. and Michigan State University has a certification program for graduate studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, both established in 2008.

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