

# Bringing Animals Into Feminist Critiques of Science

TRACEY SMITH-HARRIS

*L'auteure discute des images mensongères des femmes et des animaux dans la recherche scientifique, de l'importante contribution des féministes qui continuent à critiquer la science, de l'exclusion des féministes de l'étude des animaux et les liens importants présents entre l'oppression des humains et des animaux.*

I am not convinced by the argument that there is only so much time and money in the world and therefore we should concentrate our efforts on alleviating those injustices against fellow humans. Moreover, not only am I not convinced by that but it seems to me that a great many of the injustices that humans perpetuate against animals are themselves deeply embedded in the very same systems of domination that lead to injustices against humans. (Birke, 1994: 134)

When I first became interested in Human-Animal Studies (HAS) many feminist friends warned me not to get involved in research in this area.<sup>1</sup> They discussed the political repercussions of being marginalized from the debates that “really mattered”—those addressing the oppressions connected to humans. But, it seemed to me that this issue fit squarely in the discussions and issues that feminist researchers continue to be interested in—oppression, inequality, marginalization, and eventual bridging. If as a philosophical principle, feminist researchers and activists want to create a truly just and fair world then we need to ensure that our research is inclusive. A truly expanded notion of

humanitarianism is necessary for us to fully understand the complexities of oppression. One way to help create this is to look beyond our own species, to ensure that all relevant connections are being made between multiple and connected sites of oppression. By understanding the treatment of nonhuman animals and responding with appropriate critiques, we go a long way to better understanding not only ourselves and the inequalities perpetuated within and between human groups, but our complex relationships with animals and our very real connections to them.

There are many similarities between the ways in which women have been perceived in modern scientific inquiry, and the current perceptions and treatment of nonhuman animals.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Human-Animal Studies should be of particu-

mals is the hope that women will not be seen as similarly part of “nature.” Some feminists working in the area of animals and science are critical of this separation as “whatever ‘animals’ are, they are more than just whatever it is we wish to transcend” (Birke 1995: 50). In this article, I will discuss the false images of both women and animals in scientific research, the important contribution feminists continue to make in their critiques of science, the separation of feminists from the study of animals and the important connections that can be made between the oppression of humans and the oppression of nonhuman animals, particularly the attempts by some feminists to bridge this gap.

Science is based, in part, on the notion of objectivity. As George Schaller states in the foreword of

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lar interest to feminists. Women were, and to some extent still are, written about in scientific research as though we are at the mercy of our biology. Even though women and nonhuman animals often share the fate of being reduced to our/their biology, many feminists still do not fully demonstrate a concern for nonhuman animals or fail to see how animals are related to feminist studies (Gruen). It may be that one of the reasons for this neglect and distance from ani-

Shirley Strum's book, *Almost Human: A Journey into the World of Baboons*:

if a scientist takes too much vocal pride in objectivity, beware. Observing is subjective: the animal is only an illustration created out of a personal perspective, based on which questions are raised, which facts written down, which information ignored. Another biologist asking

different questions will create a different animal. (xi)

This is an important statement, that animals are socially constructed, even in science. Of course they exist, flesh and blood, as we do, but humans essentially create their “essence.” This occurs not only in science, but also in fiction, folklore, popular culture, and in particular industries (food, clothing, and entertainment), religion, etc. Not sur-

in the poorest taste if done regarding human categories (i.e., class, gender, race, etc.). We feel justified in our assumptions (scientific and otherwise) regarding animals with respect to biology that are no longer deemed acceptable or useful for humans. And, we often fail to see scientific observation and experimentation on animals as political, but in fact it is extremely political and it can tell us a great deal about our relationship with nonhuman animals. As Lynda Birke indi-

our benefit, not for the sake of their own lives, communities, and ecosystems. Nonhuman animals are often conceptualized only in terms of human benefit. What or who they are seems to matter very little in modern science.

For years, feminists sought to prove women’s position in the cultural and intellectual realms of society, therefore rejecting any links, or connections, to the natural world, including our connections to animals (Noske). Barbara Noske points out, “in their desire to free women from this natural object-status many feminists have failed to address the question of objectified status of nature and animals” (110). Naming, for instance, is known to be a powerful political process. Both women and nonhuman animals, among many other groupings of humans, have been defined as “other.” Women have been defined as different and thus lesser than men, and nonhumans as different and thus lesser than humans. Within science, as Lynda Birke indicates, “Scientific naming of animals gives them a species and describes them as such; who or what they are matters little for these purposes” (1994: 7). In fact, nonhuman animals are rarely theorized in scientific inquiry as having individuating traits. They are deemed as being ruled by their biology. Birke also indicates

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prisingly, nonhuman animals are essentially constructed to serve human needs. We know that the social construction of gender and in particular, the social construction of women in science, has been of particular interest to feminist researchers. Why is it then, that many feminists have been unable or unwilling to shift their gaze ever so slightly, and fully incorporate a concern for nonhuman animals? This is an especially important omission as several researchers indicate that there is much to be learned from the treatment and oppression of nonhuman animals and its connection to the treatment of marginalized human groups, including women and girls (Adams, 1995, 1991; Birke, 2002; Kappeler; Nibert; Noske).

Nonhuman animals are often discussed in research and science in terms of generalities, especially in terms of species generalities. It is common, even in layperson conversations, to hear discussions that generalize about animals’ “nature.” Humans still feel justified in making sweeping generalizations about animals, especially regarding biological make-up and their connections to behavior, in ways that would be considered absolutely

cates, “[i]t is ironic that, while feminist theorists emphasize the fluidity of gender, the same theory assumes an underlying fixity of nature and animals” (2002: 432). We humans, for the most part, fail to see the ways in which nonhuman animals are socially constructed, which often has more to do with our biases than their actual biology or the ways in which they are a part of our social worlds. In fact, animals are a huge part of our social worlds, even when we fail to see them as such (Arluke and Sanders).

Nonhuman animals are socially constructed in every area of our lives—in the family, in our supermarkets and kitchens, in the clothing, furniture, and household products that we use, in the vaccines and medicines we consume, and in countless other areas of our lives. In science, nonhuman animals are socially constructed as research objects (Arluke 1994; 1988; Birke 1994; Phillips). Nonhuman animals used in scientific research are numbered and not named and with the new technologies for genetic manipulation and cloning they are viewed as being created by humans, not born. They are most often constructed for

[a] central problem with humans versus other animal polarity is that it ignores the obvious point that all species are different. It is not just that humans are different from “other animals.” (1994: 94)

As we have seen, there has been reluctance in modern scientific inquiry to acknowledge “mindedness” or “conscious intention” in nonhuman animals (Midgley 15). Nonhuman animals have been written about as though they lack emotions, intent and mindedness. In modern scientific research, nonhumans are perceived as scientific objects and

research tools (Midgley 15). Birke asks, “[w]hy has science been so concerned to maintain [the separation between human and nonhuman], consistently denying for years that other species have minds or consciousness?” (1994: 6). It is here, with its cogent critique of the objectification of nature that a feminist critique of science is particularly well suited to engage more actively with a concern for nonhuman animals.

There is a notion that is still upheld by many, that science is apolitical; that it is somehow beyond social justice issues. Science is frequently presented as an objective—classless, raceless, genderless, nationless—endeavour. In feminist critiques of science, the claim to objectivity on the part of orthodox scientists is challenged. Likewise, race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and nationality are all given a place in the more broadly defined critical engagement with the scientific method. Nothing to do with humans is left unchallenged. Taking their investigations further, these critics seek to understand the issue in terms of costs and benefits; which groups, in which nations benefit from the flow of scientific research dollars and who precisely pays the related costs. By raising these issues, the efforts of feminist researchers have gone a long way toward shifting the deeply held perception of objectivity in scientific inquiry. For this they are to be applauded. However, many feminist researchers continue to neglect, or only marginally examine the study of human-animal relations (Birke 2002) and this remains an area begging for further concern and research. Often though, it is a matter of feminist critiques of science not fully addressing or articulating their reaction to the oppression of animals.

For clarification and to help demonstrate the potential of this research, I provide the following three examples of feminist critiques of science that begin to address the question of animal oppression, but stop short of

fully exploring this area: 1) Some feminist researchers have been critical of sex inequality in scientific research. These critiques have focused on the methods used in scientific research, for instance using male subjects only in animal testing (Harding; Rosser).<sup>3</sup> Some feminist critiques argue the need to utilize female lab animals when conducting research, especially research related to women and girls (Rosser). What I find most interesting is that these critiques are presented without a discussion of the important larger debate—should animals (whether male or female) be used in scientific testing at all?

2) Another area of concern for feminists studying gender inequality in science is the unequal access for women to admission in science programs. Sue Rosser for instance, examines ways to transform curriculum in biology and presents strategies to try and attract women to science in general, and to biology in particular. Number 12 on the list of 20 transformative techniques is “Decrease laboratory exercises in introductory courses in which students must kill or render treatment that may be perceived as particularly harsh” (128). In as far as Rosser is

legitimate, while advocating the elimination of human forms of oppression.

3) Even feminist critiques that examine “animal issues” as feminist issues and are critical of the use of animals in science, sometimes shy away from outright condemnation of the use of animals in scientific research. For example, Deborah Slicer states that:

I am convinced that as feminist theorists and practitioners we must address the interconnecting dominations of women, animals, and nonsentient nature, as ecofeminists insist, along with other social dominations, in order to understand sufficiently and correct any one of them.... I realize that I have made very few recommendations about when, if ever, we may use animals in research, although I have made my general antipathy toward such use clear. Nonetheless, and this may be obvious, I still feel some ambivalence over the issue, a gut sense that my antipathy is appropriate but that its grounds are not yet well enough articulated. (109-110)

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advocating a reduction in the use of animals for experimentation at the introductory level, she is to be commended. But, if one of the important roles of feminist critiques of science is to initiate research and advocate teaching from a “more holistic, global scope rather than the more reduced and limited scale [in which] problems [are] traditionally considered” (Rosser 128) then feminist researchers cannot reasonably present one form of oppression as

Slicer finds the use of animal in science strongly objectionable. She is clearly labouring over her stance, but in the end is unable to fully articulate her position. However, she discusses her strong belief that feminists are well suited to investigate all forms of domination, including that of animals and nonsentient nature, and she invites other feminists to help articulate the complexities of issues surrounding the use of animals in science.

## Conclusion

Perhaps it should not be surprising that many feminist researchers have yet to fully incorporate an ethic of caring for nonhuman animals, as Human-Animal Studies has only recently become an area of marginal concern in most disciplines (Shapiro). Some feminists doing work in the area of Human-Animal Studies are critical of feminists who have failed to fully incorporate concerns for nonhuman animals into their critiques and research. Carol Adams, for example, believes that feminism for the most part is “a species-specific philosophical system, in which (an expanded) humanity continues to negate the other animals precisely because their otherness is located in the natural sphere” (1995: 16). Others working in the area of feminist critiques of science, that incorporate a notion of human-animal continuity, concur. Birke believes that for the most part, feminism as a social movement has “ignored issues to do with animals” (1995: 32). She finds that feminists often want to know what animals have got to do with women. Birke answers,

[o]ne of the strengths of feminist thought is that it is never “just” about women: it is a critical discourse that tends to ask uncomfortable questions about everything. To ask questions about how our theorizing relates to what we understand of the natural world is as much a part of our remit as anything else. (34)

During the past decade, several influential studies and anthologies have been written that offer feminists a solid platform to continue researching our connections with animals.<sup>4</sup> Feminist researchers are particularly well suited to move human-animal studies from the margin to the center of academic research activities. In the same way that feminist research has been at the forefront of the critique of modern science, we can, should, and

I believe will be at the forefront of the debates in human-animal studies. As feminist researchers and activists, we cannot shy away from the really difficult debates and must recognize the interconnections between all forms of inequality—whether against human or nonhuman animals.

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the recent discussions about the inclusion of Human-Animal Studies (HAS) into various disciplines, including women’s studies and feminist studies, please see the Special 10th Anniversary Issue on the State of Human-Animal Studies in *Society and Animals* 10 (4) (2002).

<sup>2</sup>I must confess that I have yet to find a term for “animals” that fully encompasses the complexities of who they are. According to Birke: “Whatever notion of ‘animal’ we use, it is always a construction (just as ‘woman’ is a construction)” (1995: 42). “Nonhuman animals” sounds like a qualifier, similar to saying “nonwhite” or “nonmale.” “Animals other than humans” has similar connotations. Perhaps animals cannot and should not be grouped into such a broad category. For example, should a whale and a rabbit be in the same category or a bear and a domestic cat? There seems to be more differences than similarities and in fact, some nonhuman animals are much closer to humans (generally, physically and mentally) than they are to each other. In addition, it is important to recognize that as humans, we too are animals, a fact that is too often neglected and/or purposely ignored. For the purposes of this article, the terms “humans” and “nonhuman animals” will be used throughout. I recognize that these terms are less than ideal,

but for the moment they remain the best of our limited terminology.

<sup>3</sup>Birke discusses the fallacy of the “assumption that rats should be used to test cosmetics at all” and the omission in most feminist critiques to study the power structures that allow scientists to continue the use, and justify such use, of animals in scientific methods (1995: 34).

<sup>4</sup>This listing is not exhaustive but demonstrates the scope and depth of research being conducted by feminists in Human-Animal Studies: Carol Adams (1995, 1991); Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan; Lynda Birke (1994); and Greta Gaard.

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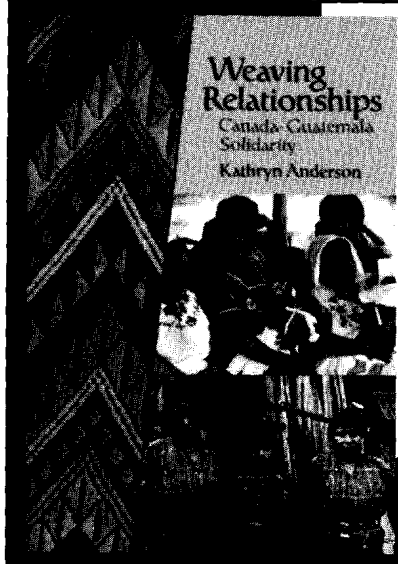




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