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## **Psychology and the Study of Human-Animal Relationships**

The breadth and diversity of psychology as a discipline resists easy generalization. Sub-fields—psychoanalysis, experimental psychology, environmental psychology, the psychology of religion, and the psychology of women—all crowd under the umbrella of the American Psychological Association. No unifying theory unites these disparate branches of the psychology “tree.” Indeed, guiding assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies are not only distinct but also often contradictory. Publication outlets mirror their disciplinary tracks.

Despite this, I would risk one generalization about psychology writ large: The study of human-animal relationships historically has been ignored and continues to resist attention. Only in small part is this due to the proliferation of sub-fields and the resulting lack of a disciplinary “home” for the psychological study of human-animal relationships. Psychology is conventionally defined as “the science or study of the activities of living things and their interaction with the environment” (Harris & Levey, 1975, pp. 22-36) with such activities including sense perception, responses to stimuli, learning, problem-

solving, emotions, motivations, personality, mental disorders, and individual-group interaction. Yet, when the “living things” are humans, attention has not been paid to their animal environments.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when the living things are nonhuman animals, their relationships with humans get short shrift.

The historical roots of psychology work against a psychology of human-nonhuman animal relationships. Psychology originally branched from philosophy, which, preoccupied with body-mind dualities, assigned body to animals and mind or soul to humans. This radical divide runs from Aristotle’s *De Anima* through Descartes’ famous dictum, “*Cogito, ergo sum,*” to John Stuart Mill’s concept of perception and learning as “mental chemistry” (Thomson, 1968). However, since the late nineteenth century, two trends spurred by the Darwinian revolution have underscored human-animal commonalities rather than differences. The first trend considers “the human as animal” and hence, obeying the laws of the entire animal kingdom. The second trend, exemplified in studies of animal cognition, language, and emotion, explores the “animal as human,” assessing the extent to which certain animal species such as parrots and non-human primates exhibit abilities thought to be uniquely human. Unfortunately, to date neither of these trends has fulfilled its potential to stimulate the study of humans and animals in relation to one another.

## **Theoretical and Research Traditions**

In this article, I describe selected theoretical and research traditions exemplifying each of these two trends, suggesting ways that such traditions can contribute to a psychology of human-animal relationships, not merely commonalities. Specifically, I argue that current theoretical paradigms within psychology—contextualism, interactionism, and dynamic systems—share principles that provide fertile ground for moving from commonality to relationship.

### **The Human as Animal**

This trend is exemplified in approaches that seek common unifying principles of behavior encompassing all animals, humans as well as non-humans. Laws governing behavior from studies of pigeons, rats, and other non-human animals—with the assumption that these principles would apply equally to other species, including humans—derived from the behaviorism of Watson,

Pavlov, and Skinner (1974). By reducing all mentalistic concepts to observable behavior-environment contingencies, Skinner concluded, “no special kind of mind stuff is assumed” (p. 242). Behaviorist principles of classical and operant conditioning have spawned both a behaviorist psychology of animal behavior and a behaviorist psychology of human behavior, on parallel tracks.

Similarly, Bowlby’s (1965) attachment theory drew on ethological descriptions of species-specific innate behaviors that ensure the survival of mammalian young. Parallel to the reciprocal systems of care giving and security seeking that maintain the close proximity of nonhuman primate mothers and their young offspring, Bowlby posited an evolved human “attachment system” within which babies’ cries, calls, smiles, and later clinging and following elicit security-providing care from an “attachment figure,” generally, their mothers. Like Skinner (1974), he drew on evolutionary theory to argue that humans as animals obey the same developmental principles as other species whose young have an extended period of dependency. However, Bowlby assumed that infants and young children attach exclusively to human caregivers.

## **The Animal as Human**

The psychology of animal behavior is tapping the still hotly contested outer limits of the abilities of animals, notably non-human primates, dolphins, and birds, to acquire the syntax and vocabulary of human language (Bekoff & Jamieson, 1996). Reflecting this approach are studies that examine the ability of such species to engage in what are thought of as “higher” human cognitive processes. For example, Pepperberg’s (2001) work with her gray parrot Alex has demonstrated his ability to perform cognitive tasks, such as if-then reasoning and multiple classification, that Piaget deemed challenging for children under seven years of age. A third strand of research (Thompson, Miles, & Lyn, 1997) searches the animal kingdom for emotions such as empathy, altruism, guilt, and pride—emotions labeled as human because they presumably derive from higher mental processes. Like the tradition of “human as animal,” these research directions constitute a form of parallelism, using descriptions of human behavior, cognition, and emotion to document the

same or similar processes in nonhuman animals. There is little recognition of human in relation to, or in connection with, other species.

## **Humans “with” Animals**

Despite these two historical traditions stressing commonalities among animal species, including humans, psychology as a field has been slow to develop an Animal Studies. Nevertheless, exemplary studies in the last 50 years underscore the fruitfulness of such research. One line of research documents the stress-reducing effects of pet dog presence for adults (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991); elderly (Siegel, 1990); and children (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983). Why is friendly dog presence stress-reducing? One possibility is that such presence functions as an “attachment figure” to convey security and safety. This suggests that attachment theory may be a broad enough “tent” to encompass animals as attachment figures for humans, and vice versa. A second line of research provides evidence that animal presence (not only dogs but also rabbits and other small furry creatures) facilitates human social approach and interaction for children and adults, both with (Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989) and without disabilities (Hunt, Hunt, & Gomulkiewicz, 1992). Together, these research directions suggest that human interactions with animals, particularly pets, affect human well being and functioning.

Happily, current theoretical paradigms within psychology, such as contextualism (Dixon & Lerner, 1992), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and dynamic systems theory (Thelen, 2000), all emphasize the interaction of person with environment, detailed study of environments—including their living components—and, importantly, conceptualization of person-within-environment as a single dynamically changing system. Since pet animals and other animals are pervasive in the environments of human beings, these principles logically lead psychologists to examine human and animal relationships as an interdependent system. How might contextualism advance Animal Studies within the first tradition I described, that of humans as animals? A contextualist addressing behaviorists like Skinner might ask how pet animals and their human owners mutually reinforce each other and how, therefore, animals and humans modify one another’s behavior. The dynamic

systems theorist would view people-with-animals as a single system, “acting on one another in dynamic interaction” (Dixon & Lerner, 1992, p. 35).

What would contextualism offer Animal Studies within the second tradition, considering animals as humans? With each finding of higher (human-like) cognitive, linguistic, and emotion functioning in nonhuman animals, contextualists might ask what implications these capacities have for human relationships with animals? Ecological psychologists like Bronfenbrenner (1979) might challenge a nascent Animal Studies psychology to document how animals and humans respond to, and modify, each other within their significant environments or ecological niches.

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> For clarity I adopt the convention of referring to human animals as “humans” and nonhuman animals as “animals.”

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