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An Animal Is not a Human; Or Is It?

**Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies**

By Margo DeMello

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Psychology is a broad discipline that aims to understand what we are, who we are, and why we are as we are. It embraces a range of methodological techniques and theoretical views, providing a fertile ground for discussion and creative advances in both theoretical and applied research that serve to improve our understanding of this unique species known as *Homo sapiens*.

Such research has served not only to increase our knowledge and understanding but also to improve the welfare of the human condition, at both the individual and societal levels. Such improvements relate to areas as diverse as neuroscience and the effects of brain injury, child development and education, the effects of aging and how to meet the needs of older adults, how and why we differ as individuals, and how we interact in social contexts. Psychology has influenced ethical views, legislation, and the design and management of work, social, and recreational environments. However, one ubiquitous aspect of human existence that is, as yet, under-researched is our relationships with the “others,” the nonhuman organisms with which we share our private and public psychological and physical spaces.

Psychology as a discipline has interesting, varied, and inconsistent relationships with other species and how we perceive what they can tell us about ourselves. Psychologists have used and continue to use them as models of humans, for example, to investigate how humans learn, be that about spatial mapping or language, or to investigate efficacy of psychotropic drugs or brain surgery. In these endeavours to uncover more about our own species, we fluctuate between how we categorize these nonhuman research participants. Sometimes we group all the participants as the same and thus group their data, or alternatively we recognise that individuals are individuals and therefore can show different results. Likewise, we either realize that different species are unique in their own ways or ignore the potential effects of such differences and consider them as close equivalents of humans, close enough to be used as human models. A further area of psychological interest in animals is how they can assist in maintaining or improving human health through our interactions with them. Thus animals in psychology, as outlined here, illustrate the paradoxes of human perceptions of the “others” and how these affect both the human and nonhuman animals involved.

Margo DeMello’s book *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* provides an accessible introduction to the diversity of ways in which animals influence how humans think and act, both through our direct, or indirect, relations with actual animals or our symbolic representations of them. The content ranges across and within disciplines as disparate as literature studies, ethology, and social and cognitive psychology. This may sound off-putting to those whose reading tends to be restricted primarily to works directly related to their professional or personal interests. Do not be put off. This is a book where the whole is certainly greater than its parts, as DeMello illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of the field of Anthrozoology (the study of human animal interactions) by drawing on examples from multiple disciplines.. Throughout the work she weaves the connections of ideas and knowledge through diverse perspectives, thereby providing insight into approaches taken by different disciplines and enabling the reader to consider new and future avenues for research.

DeMello’s writing style is informative and clear. There is a wealth of information presented relating to a range of areas of human-animal interactions. The book is not restricted to the more commonly presented aspect of human interactions with companion (pet) animals but takes the reader on a more far-reaching, and not always pleasant, journey. She considers our relations with animals that we use but do not necessarily see or interact with, be they wild, those in laboratories, or those that end up on our dinner plates, as well as relations with animals we use to help humans in therapeutic situations or simply to entertain us on TV and in zoos and circuses. She draws on research that attempts to understand how our various relations with animals influence how we “see” the animal and thus how we interact and react at individual and societal levels, both historically and at present. She draws also on research that has considered the view of the “consumer” / “end user” / “beneficiary” who may be completely physically disassociated from the animal, as well as those who work or live with the animals including those working in slaughter houses, laboratories, and in animal rescue. DeMello provides underlying theories and postulated explanations from a variety of sources and standpoints, some of which a reader may agree with, others not. This is a book that usefully engenders critical debate and reflects the burgeoning state of this fascinating field of study.

Given the extent of the subject material and cultural differences in many practices and concepts of animals, the author has sensibly concentrated on drawing most of her illustrative material from the United States. Whilst I have some knowledge of aspects of American human-animal interaction research and issues, with respect to my own areas of interest, there was much that was new to me. This I found not only interesting, and in many instances disturbing, and but also enlightening, as the differences between not only nations but also sub-cultures within a nation were illustrated and explanations put forward, and contextualised with regard to U.S. and international research.

At the end of most chapters of the book are short pieces by invited contributors. These are interesting additions that provide singular perspectives on the contributor’s interest in and approach to the field of anthrozoology,

*Animals and Society* has clearly been deeply researched and is comprehensive in the material it covers. Its multidisciplinary nature means that, inevitably, there will be potential errors in understanding, clarity of expression, or technical correctness. Those I detected were minor; for example, when talking about animal training (page 352) DeMello says, “Today, behavioural science and operant conditioning are often used in training animals. These are more positive methods of training than those relying on coercion and punishment.” Whilst technically punishment (be that negative or positive) is integral to operant conditioning, this error does not detract from the point the author is making.

There are a couple of structural points in the book that I found disappointing. My first and greatest concern was the inconsistency in citing sources. Though this may reflect a word count issue, it would have been a better editorial decision to have reduced the external contributions in favour of complete citations. On several occasions I wanted to know where the information had come from, either because it was new to me, or that I was not in agreement and wanted to follow it up further. Given the obvious potential for this as a student textbook, this citation issue is of some concern.

My second problem, which I suspect is a personal preference, was the illustrations. Whilst these were all given figure numbers, they were rarely referred to in the text, and did not always seem to be relevant to their location in the chapter. In many cases their purpose was not clarified by the figure caption.

The text has interesting sidebars inserted, though in one case the sidebar was not that which was referred to in the text. This was unfortunate as the text referred to a sidebar regarding treatment programs for young and adult animal abusers developed by the Animals and Society Institute, which many readers may have found of interest to their applied work. The sidebar was actually about a specific form of sexually related animal abuse, namely Crush videos, where animals are crushed to death by women in high-heeled, stiletto shoes. Thought provoking, but not what was expected.

Overall, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* is a well-considered and artfully structured work that provokes thoughtful reflection and stimulates ideas for both theoretical and applied study; it is a worthwhile addition to my library. Notwithstanding the provisos mentioned above, it is a useful text for students studying psychology in general and any student studying human-animal interactions. Whatever their main discipline may be within the sciences, humanities, or arts, be they primarily interested in humans and/or animals, readers will draw both information and inspiration from this text.

Abstract

Reviews the book *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* by Margo DeMello. This book provides an accessible introduction to the diversity of ways in which animals influence how humans think and act, both through our direct, or indirect, relations with actual animals themselves or our symbolic representations of them. The content ranges across and within disciplines as disparate as literature studies, ethology, and social and cognitive psychology. DeMello links the multidisciplinary nature of the field of human-animal interactions into the interdisciplinary subject of anthrozoology, illustrating ideas and knowledge through diverse perspectives, thereby providing insight into approaches taken by different disciplines and enabling the reader to consider new and future avenues for research. Whilst primarily using a U.S. perspective of human-animal interactions, the author draws on international research. Overall a well-written, though not always fully referenced, work, this book engenders critical debate and reflects the burgeoning state of this fascinating field of study.