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Animals, Humans and Sociability

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Abstract

This article discusses animal studies from the point of view of sociability as an “inter-subjective field of action” and as an agent and builder of society (“doing society”). In sociology, the zoological connection has availed of the theory of borders and critical realism, but, above all, of constructionism, in its interactionist and ethno-methodological sense and both focused on social micro-interaction. The construction of the identity of social actors (both human and animal) is especially evident in interaction regarding play, games, sport, daily life and work. In these spheres, analyses shed light on ambivalent and contradictory human experiences that clash with the dominant culture, while highlighting practical resistance against speciesism, which it is well worth to bring to the attention of future research, using open, mixed methodologies.

Keywords: Animals studies, post-humanism, intersubjectivity, sociability, resistance

Premise

Interaction between humans and animals is common: we find it in the collective imagination (literature, the media); in religious symbolism; in popular language; in everyday life; in many professions (agriculture, industry, medicine, science, defence).

Awareness of this reality imposed itself on western philosophical thinking at the end of the twentieth century, with post-humanism, that is, a view surpassing anthropocentrism, seen as a hierarchical and separatist paradigm, opposing the human to the non-human. Post-humanism suggests that science

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should observe non-humans such as artefacts, technology, ecosystems and, last but not least, animals (Braidotti, 2006; Wolfe, 2009).

By questioning the primacy of humans on the planet and by reconsidering their rapport with other forms of life, a considerable part of twenty-first-century science has addressed the animal issue. This process has been called “animal turn” (Weil, 2010; Trask, 2012) or “zoological connection” (Bryant, 1979).

The tepid interest shown by the human and social sciences in animal issues during the last century (Singer, 1975), may be associated with our Cartesian inheritance, that is, with the net distinction between the object of research and subjective worlds. Sociology, in particular, has entered the space, both internal and external, that stands between animal and human nature (Murphy, 1995) due to a number of unsolved ideological gaps:

- ethnocentric polarization (Arluke, 2002; Lindemann, 2005);
- a paternalistic tendency (Tovey, 2003; Munro, 2005; Urbanik, 2012);
- Mead’s language-centric theory (1907), whereby symbolic interaction affects only self-aware actors capable of handling linguistic exchanges, thus excluding the animal world (Collins, 1989).

Recently, however, this reading of Mead’s has been surpassed (Alger and Alger, 1997; Myers, 1998; Sanders and Arluke, 1993; Sanders, 1999; Myers, 2003; Brandt, 2004; Irvine, 2004a; Irvine, 2004b; Wilkie and Inglis, 2007), and inter-species non-linguistic exchanges reconsidered, extending the range of symbolic interactionism to the animal world.

In the twenty-first century, post-humanist and post-Meadian sociology has ceased to view human issues from a self-referential perspective, but tends to consider them as ever-changing products of history, linked, above all, to material and / or symbolic practices involving non-human otherness too. It now believes it is difficult to investigate social behaviour without including scientific non-human variables in observation (Oakley, 1974; Sanders, 2003; Lindemann, 2005; Laurier et al., 2006; Haraway, 2003, 2008), as demonstrated by the inclusion of the issue in sociological platforms regarding animals: scientific journals, research institutions and associations (Hobson-West, 2007).

The aim of this article is to appraise studies regarding the zoological connection from the specific perspective of sociability. Below, I shall provide a definition of sociability and discuss the reasons why this category of analysis is important to the animal turn in social research.

Sociability

Sociability is generally defined as a tendency to be socially available and interact with others. It is a quality that requires an understanding of situations, the ability to adapt and engage in dialogue, symbolic of inter-subjective exchange. The heuristic value of sociability is central to the sociology of Simmel (1949), according to whom social structure is a bottom-up construction, where the interpersonal dimension is crucial. Society, according to Simmel, is the macro-result of the gradual objectification of micro-interactions, reiterated by social actors. This view makes sociability the nerve centre of all social processes: the base of social architecture, the interface between single subjects, primary groups and society, between individual and collective action (Clough, 1979). Going more deeply into Simmel's concept, I shall consider the term as meaning the "field" (Bourdieu, 1992) where social interaction between social actors endowed with relational competence and inter-subjective potential occurs. Sociability as a field of inter-subjective interaction is a more structured category than simple sociality and closer to Simmel's idea of "doing society". In keeping with the doing society human-animal sociability in this article plays a double role. On the one hand, it is a tool for a privileged observation of animal studies (Alger and Alger, 1997, 2003; Arluke, 2003; Myers, 2003; Sanders, 2003); on the other, an understanding of human-animal sociability open the path to a better understating of human sociability in general. Studying animals helps us grasp what it means to be human; which mechanisms we avail of when interacting with others; how we build up social meanings (Schutz, 1967; Coulter, 1989); how we organise our lives; how we perceive our links with other living beings (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Sanders, 1999; Beck and Katcher, 1996; Jerolmack, 2005). The issue assumes particular importance against the background of recent developments in communications, subsequent to the use of the social media. Some wonder whether these new media are actually capable of distorting the traditional mechanisms of human sociability (Chambers, 2013). The interaction mediated by the internet may appear "cold" as compared to hat "warm" sociability, based on physicality, one experiences with animals. Furthermore, we need to ask ourselves about the theoretical supports (apart from the concept of sociability) a sociology in line with post-humanist and therefore inclusive sensitivity, may count on.

Theoretical approaches

Critical realism and the theory of borders facilitate sociological research concerning the zoological connection (Carolan, 2005). The former because it has incorporated a non-linguistic conception of social interaction and a methodology which valorises the role of practical experience and of the body in the cognitive process and in the construction of social relations (Archer et al., 1998). The latter because it questions the separation between nature and culture (Ingold, 1997), considering it simply as a historical process. Furthermore, the idea that borders between species are indefinite and changeable, opens up to the theoretical possibility that animals are capable of being social actors, actors in a play (Beck and Katcher, 2003). Both approaches facilitate studies of the non-verbal, non-symbolic inter-subjectivity typical of the human-animal sociability phenomenon. However, the main theoretical support to inter-species research is to be sought in constructionism, which throws light on two interlinked phenomena (Hannigan, 1995). At macro-sociological level, the animal social-construction theory highlights the gradual detachment between humans and the natural world and the systematic, ceaseless construction of animal otherness which, as such, may be manipulated (Stibbe, 2001). At micro-sociological level, constructionism has revealed how animal guardians build the individual identity of their companions and, by way of reflection, their own (Melson, 1998). The constructionist schools most concerned with this theme are the symbolic and ethno-methodological constructionists, who share views and concepts, but also present noteworthy differences (Shapiro, 1990; Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Goode, 2006). Ethnomethodology studies the practices and accounts that members of a society avail of to produce ordinary events. Using intuitive, qualitative methods it does not aim at verifying pre-existing theories in the field, as it is not theory-driven, but theory-creating. It explains the “lived order” starting from practices confined to the known and performed by actors, without introducing anything else (Garfinkel, 1967). Symbolic interactionism does not describe specific practices, but seeks the symbolic meaning attributed by actors to acts and processes, preferring indicative, qualitative, though theoretically oriented methods. The researcher presumes the interactions between subject-actors to be based on shared meanings and mental states. Animals are seen – by post-Meadians – as subjects endowed with memory and awareness of their own emotions (Regan, 1984). The two schools differ on the nature of the interaction which, in the case of interactionism consists in symbolic exchange (also non-verbal), while for ethnomethodology interaction is an intuitive event of a likely bodily nature. The schools differ also on ways of organising analyses and interpreting. For

the interactionist Sanders (1999, 2003), closeness between humans and animals is a guarantee of interpretative validity. If guardians treat their dogs like people, the researcher is tempted to record this as a sociological datum. The ethno-methodologist Goode (2006) objects that the accounts gathered by interactionists are always vague and generic, never concrete and contextualised, as required by ethno-methodology. Even if ethno-methodologists are not interested in the mental states of animals (because they believe unrecognisable) and the interactionists address the possibilities of the animal mind, both approaches now share many theoretical tools fundamental to animal studies, like the idea that the animal is a meaningful social actor worthy of observation of its role in social and cultural processes and the conviction that the focus research needs to be the inter-subjective dimension, that is, sociability. Finally, in the light of Goffman's theory (1961b, 1963) – whereby experience and awareness of the *co-presence* of two subjects, even if not verbalised – the differences between interactionists and ethno-methodologists are dwindling (Jerolmack, 2005; Irvine, 2004, 2008).

The two schools share:

- the cognitive ethologists' criticism of behaviourism. They consider explanations of animal behaviour based on instinct and on the action / reaction couple ineffective. Cognitivism believes, on the contrary, that animals are aware of themselves and of their physical and relational environment, are capable of intentional actions, of defining situations and adapting to them, because they are bearers of emotions, needs and desires (Griffin, 1984, 1992; Chijiwa et al., 2015; Müller et al., 2015);
- the surpassing of anthropomorphism, according to which it is legitimate to interpret animal behaviour by availing exclusively of grids suited to humans, providing there be familiarity and reciprocity between the interpreter and the animal. Criticism of this approach sustains the probability that such interpretations are actually projections of human feelings on animals (Kennedy, 1992).

Somewhere between behaviourism and traditional anthropomorphism classical scholars of both schools have found a third way called "critical anthropomorphism" which provides methods and a regime of strict critical control of data collection and interpretation (Sanders, 1999; Bekoff et al., 2002; Irvine, 2004; Goode, 2006).

In conclusion, animal studies have:

- re-evaluated Darwinism, according to which shared human and animal roots justify behavioural and emotional similarities;

- redefined anthropomorphic language as a powerfully communicative stylistic convention, insofar as it is related to daily life, useful for conducting field observations, collecting informants' accounts and drawing up research reports;
- incorporated empathetic and phenomenological procedures, more effective in field research.

The state of the art in research

The list of topics addressed by animal studies is vast and fragmented. Research has been classified according to rather different points of view (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2008; Arluke and Sanders, 2009), which we might usefully group as families of themes:

- studies regarding the socio-historical reconstruction domain, characterized: 1. from inter-species economic exploitation (food, pharmaceuticals, health, culture and territory) to the ideology of speciesism (Singer, 1975; Ritvo, 1987; Haraway, 2003; Whatmore, 2006; Lansbury, 2007); 2. the creation of an animal hierarchy, distinguishing between those suitable for consumption and useful for scientific research, and pets (Adams, 1994; Birke, 1994; Nibert, 2002; Franklin, 2006; Haraway, 2008); 3. cruelty to animals often connoting human deviance and crime (Ascione, 1993; Arluke et al., 1999; Flynn, 2000; Merz-Perez et al., 2001; Arluke, 2006; Gunderson, 2002; Gillespie, 2014); studies of the collective imagination and social construction of animals in areas including: 1. symbolic social and the media industry (Lévi-Strauss, 1962; Berger, 1980; Baker, 2000; Irvine, 2001; Burt, 2004; Smith-Harris, 2004; Sax, 2007); 2. sport and show business (Cartmill, 1995); 3. ambiguity untamed, wild nature (Lynn, 2010; Irvine, 2012; Marvin, 2012);
- studies concerning *changes in mentality* the indicators of which are: 1. the emergence of a new field of research (Bryant, 1979; Noske, 1993; Shapiro, 1990), based on new ethical-philosophical conceptions (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Irvine, 2008); 2. the social and political reverberation of interspecies conflict (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1984; Adams, 1994; Nibert, 2003; Donovan and Adams, 2007; Stengers, 2010);

- studies on restorative affinities dealing with the mental well-being of those who include animals in their lives (Frommer and Arluke, 1999; Robins et al., 1991; Wells, 2012).

Based on this perspective chosen, which emphasizes the role of human-animal sociability, I shall focus on some cross-cutting processes regarding the themes listed above: the construction of human and animal identities, the most common interactive dynamics (games and sport), experiences of empathy / inter-species affection and sociability as a form of resistance.

Building up animal identity

Pets are social constructs the history of which has been reconstructed (Ritvo, 1987; Fudge, 2006; Mithen, 2007). A pet is a product of the nineteenth-century, the century when animals were included in families, thus generating a florid pet market. During the second half of the twentieth century, social sciences documented the transformation of the *pet* (whose human interlocutor is the *owner*), into a figure capable of surpassing the *pet-owner* phenomenon. Thus the *companion animal*, the four-legged friend, with status to equivalent humans is born. The *owner* becomes the *guardian*, the loving warden caring for animals as if they were children, protecting them, supervising their growth, health, and providing for their needs (Frommer and Arluke, 1999; Helms and Bain, 2009). Human-animal interaction produces natural rituals, daily routines, shared moods. The sociability experiences expands and acquires greater in-depth significance (Katcher and Beck, 1986; Sanders, 2003).

The construction of animal identity is no longer but specific: the identity process becomes individualized. Thanks to daily cohabitation, guardians construct unique personalities for their pets, making them distinct from other animals of the same species. The single animal acquires a unique and recognizable personality. The study of the construction of animals as individuals contributes to the in-depth development of sociological categories such as: subjectivity, personality, interior conversation, identity (Collins, 1989; Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Alger and Alger, 1999, 2003; Irvine, 2004; Jerolmack, 2005). By giving it a proper name, the animal acquires a radically different status: it becomes an effective member of the family, of the community, and, as such, it appears in family photographs, celebrates certain events, owns objects (toys and clothes), receives care and attention, catalyses emotional exchanges within the family and, finally, causes grief and bereavement when it dies (Frommer and Arluke, 1999; Flynn, 2008).

These studies heighten awareness of the crucial issue of the animal mind, which we shall look into better in the section on play and games. Sociology cannot comment on the entity and function of the animal mind, but it can tell us a lot about guardians: what meanings to attribute to interaction with animals, and the relative representations they create to this regard. The data show that guardians are convinced they clearly perceive their animals' minds, to have mental exchanges with them (Coulter, 1989). They build a humanlike identity for their animals, not so much to project their own personalities on the animals, as to legitimize the experience of sociability. The guardians are interested in strengthening the idea that, if animals react like people and feel like men, it is inevitable that human beings and animals establish strong interpersonal relationships (Irvine, 2001; Sanders, 2003; Goode, 2006).

There is also a dark side to the construction of animal identity (Rowan, 1992), the study of which is very important to the social scientist because it reveals the deeper contradictions in human-animal relationships. This is located in places that Goffman (1961a) might call "total institutions": technical and scientific laboratories where researchers work with guinea pigs, shelters for abandoned animals, kennels, veterinary clinics, breeding establishments (stables, cages). In the laboratory, the symbolic status of animals changes from that of sentient to analytical and scientific research tool (Lynch, 1988), while their deaths are deemed a useful sacrifice (Arluke, 1992), turning rats and chemicals into scientific papers (Latour, 1993). These contexts, quite distant from the domestic milieu where animals are pets or companions, underline the ambivalence of human behaviour in the private sphere and social strategies related to other species (Arluke and Groves, 1998). In total institutions, the intimacy of sociability is either completely absent (the animals are mere numbers and objects to be manipulated to obtain a product or service), or coexists with the productive routine of certain professions, entering into conflict with dominant social representations, which consider animals as aspects of production and tools functional to the socio-economic system (Arluke, 1994; Birke, 2007, 2008).

However, the complete objectification of animals is demanding, especially for technicians and researchers, who find it hard to consider laboratory animals as sentient pets. Sometimes it may happen that the same animal be perceived in two ways, as a work device and as a subject of everyday interaction. This discomfort may lead to inner conflict, when researchers realize that the ambiguity with which the identity of the animals was constructed undermines their own identity as scientists (Arluke, 1992). Sociological surveys reveal how the ambiguity of human-animal relationships produces a dual sociability: one enjoyed by guardians, and that which is denied or hidden, involuntarily, however hard they seek to repress it (Weider, 1980).

Although researchers and operators make a point of giving numbers and not names to guinea pigs or animals destined to become “products” (food or scientific), experience moments of keen embarrassment and emotional crisis. These workers and professionals are not always able to return home peacefully to their pets, having worked all day with rats deprived of their liberty, dignity and life.

Research on these domains confirms that sociability is closely linked to the construction of individual animal identity, since it is possible to treat animals as objects only they are not attributed a name and a personality. It is in these studies that the heuristic power of sociability reveals itself, since it acts as an indicator of human-animal ambiguity. Micro interactions and macro social actions clash questioning inter-species domination ideologies and delegitimizing the cultural rationalizations by which humans exercise control over the animal world.

In total institutions, the contradiction between the two types of behaviour - the instrumental and the interactive - becomes obvious and impossible to ignore. The embarrassment which the operator or technician perceives as moral conflict, is in reality a form of conflict running through the whole of society, a symptom of reaction at loggerheads, although often unconsciously, with the practice of violence by one species against another.

The construction of the identity of guardians

Sociology attributes the construction of a sense of self to the dynamic of interactions between individuals and other social subjects. Reassessing the value of sociability with animals, several studies have shown that, thanks to it, guardians improve the quality of their lives in areas that are considered fundamental to: wellness, socialization, the practice of sports.

Wellness

The care of one's health, psychic and / or physical healing are aspects important to the construction of a person's identity. Numerous in-depth studies show that relationships with animals help to maintain or improve a guardian's health (pet therapy), with important, measurable physiological effects (Kruse, 2001, 2002). Studies of health-care statistics reveal a positive correlation between health and daily familiarity with pets (Beck and Katcher, 2003; Nimer and Lundahl, 2007; Barker and Wolen, 2008; Friedmann, 2009; O'Haire, 2013; O'Haire et al., 2015). Many diseases (such as diabetes, depression, cardiovascular disease and cancer) improve. People who

experience a physical and / or psychological illness improve the quality of their lives and often find the will to live thanks to an animal (Furst, 2006; Franklin et al., 2007).

The issue of improvements in health and well-being due to relationships with animals is also studied in relation to cost reduction. Statistics show that people who suffer - the elderly, depressed, anxious, the lonely (Veevers, 1985) - fall sick less (whether physically and psycho-physically), use fewer drugs, need a doctor less if they have a pet (Batson et al., 1998; Garrity and Stallones, 1998; Jennings et al., 1998; Wilson and Turner, 1998; Headey, 1999; Friedmann, 2009). Studies conducted in prisons, where deprivation of freedom causes strong depression and loss of a sense of identity (Sampson and Laub, 1990; Maruna et al., 2004), show that pet therapy help redefine the personality of convicts, contrasting their bent for crime and facilitating their moral redemption (Toch, 2000; Furst, 2006).

Pet therapy has proven efficacious in the fight against old-age loneliness, suffering children, women in difficulty, people affected by violence whether exercised or undergone (Beck and Katcher, 1996; Taylor, 2007).

Animals seem to have a beneficial influence on human health, even in the absence of particular circumstances. Owning an animal involves pursuing healthy habits, like walking in natural surroundings (Kellert and Wilson, 1993); it favours responsibility associated with care; it reduces aggressiveness and conflict within couples, families and even broader communities like the neighbourhood.

Socialisation

Pets are symbols of a person's personality or status; they help build the public identity of their guardians. This may be reinforced thanks to a connection with animals, which become an instrument of socialization and of cohesion of the social body. Several studies show that guardians can fit into new or denser relational networks and community settings, thanks to the presence of their animals. The apartment block, the neighbourhood, the park can become denser areas of social exchange (Messent, 1983; Robins et al., 1991). Interest in animals is aggregating and produces human sociability, social networks (both virtual and real). The presence of animals also changes the perception of the neighborhood and the community, enlarging the area within which to experience reciprocity and trust in others; it also reinforces commitment and responsibility towards the territory (Arluke and Sanders, 2009).

Sporting identity

Research regarding horses reveals their original role in the sporting activities of feudal knights (Davis et al., 2013). The construction of the rider's personality has specific traits, highlighting dynamic identification (Lindholm, 2001) and co-construction (co-shaping) of identity through a complex exchange characterized by (Haraway, 2008).

Very often, riders portray themselves as people unafraid of anything, willing to accept challenges of all kinds because "nothing is impossible" (Davis et al., 2013). Thanks to their horses, riders base their identity upon features typical of extreme sports: the ability to face adversity singlehanded, heroic stoicism, silent suffering, hard work, the ability to reach decisions quickly and address risks.

Like the relationship between hunters and their dogs, riders collaborate with their horses, creating a working partnership to achieve a common goal. While building their animals' identity, riders also build their own, where the model is that of athletes prepared to overcome all obstacles in order to win. The construction of this team recalls the Centaur archetype opposing nature-culture dualism. The sporting couple, especially when victorious, is an amalgamation of nature and culture, where it is difficult to distinguish between the two opposites. This hybridization between nature and culture is not limited to the image of the mythical Centaur, but extends to embrace context and environment. Some equestrian disciplines take place in naturally hostile and danger-filled environments thus contributing to the tough, courageous and proud image of the equestrian couple (Brandt, 2004; Birke and Brandt, 2009). These environments also represent human beings' continuous challenge against feral nature, which is gradually tamed by means of equestrian activities.

The centrality of games and sport

Research into games and sport have made important theoretical contributions to understanding the zoological connection. The dynamics of play and games was chosen by scholars as a privileged field of study, because they bring the reciprocal construction of identity to the light. Games can only take place in a democracy of equals (Riesman and Watson, 1964), where the players share a space separate from real life, characterized by amusement (Simmel, 1949). A bent for this kind of activity (voluntary, free and requiring a

suspension of ordinary life), was considered a uniquely human characteristic, until scientific attention focused on playful animal practices.

Philosophers and anthropologists (Derrida, 1999) have asked whether the animals are endowed with a mind and if animal subjectivity exists. The answer is one would need to be an animal to know for sure. Some scholars have studied cases of linguistically unmediated communication with animals in social contexts, and have come to the conclusion that self-awareness is a social product which does not require the mediation of language. Indeed, the doing mind seems to be a process related more to interaction than to body language, because experience of reciprocity and emotional exchange prevail.

The main schools of research investigating human-animal interaction, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology have confronted each other on the issue of play, highlighting the differences between their theoretical and methodological approaches. Ethnomethodology was concerned mainly with how animal reacts during dynamic play, as a record of ethnographic observation of practices witnessed in the field (Goode, 2006). Symbolic interactionism investigated the meaning of the reactions of animals (these studies usually focused on dogs), opting for the documentary method, that accounts provided by guardians and the meanings they attributed to their dogs' behaviour (Sanders, 1999). The two schools disagreed about the nature of the mind. Sanders states that humans and animals need to share mental content in order to play. Goode believes that sociology cannot verify how the animal mind (an ethological issue) creates symbols, but that it can interpret play availing of a phenomenological analytical model based on the concept of inter-subjectivity. Referring to Garfinkel (1967), according to whom human-animal interaction is not based on shared intentionality, Goode defines inter-subjectivity as a phenomenon founded only on concrete experience.

Inter-subjectivity has been emphasised by other authors (Brandt, 2004), but Goode uses it as the pivot to create a broader theoretical construct. He refers to the *vital world* theorized by Husserl, according to whom the world we take for granted is not a reflection of language, but exists prior to linguistic formulation. If the given world, the vital world, exists prior to language, then human-animal interaction too exists before its linguistic definition. According to Goode's model (2006), when examining interaction, we do not compare symbolic but rather kinetic, bodily skill. The meaning exchanged between the two partners is contextual, limited to a specific, unique situation, as the ethnomethodological concept of identity suggests. Human-animal inter-subjectivity appears possible insofar as the partners experience and share certain levels of reality, though not necessarily a common language, but a division of space and awareness of their own physicality. The partition of space, is, in fact, the specific language of inter-subjective, inter-species human-animal exchange.

According to Jerolmack (2009), play occurs within an asymmetrical relationship, because animals do not share the interpretational framework and a definition of the situation, nor do they know the rules. In addition, animal subjectivity is expressed through intention-in-action (Goode, 2006), not based on shared mental capacity. To the objection that it is not possible to check if the animal understands and shares the rules of a game, ethnomethodology replied that the rules are produced by a given situation and defined by the context: if the game works, and the animal interacts successfully, it does not make sense to ask whether it understands or not, that is, whether or not it is equipped with a mind (Arluke and Sanders, 1996). That the precondition of play is a chiefly symbolic (Irvine, 2004) or mainly kinetic skill (Shapiro, 1990), all scholars agree that this form of interaction is the one most suited to the study of human-animal micro-interactions.

According to ethologists animals play with each other, to learn how to distinguish between a serious situation and play (Loizos, 1967; Fagen, 1981; Bekoff, 2006). They avail of meta-communicative signals to convey the message that the situation is not serious: This is a game. Meta-communication defines a framework, provides the instructions (Bateson, 1956, 1972), for example, that being a game biting should not be interpreted as aggression (Bekoff, 2006).

Whether these signals may be shared by different species is a question that many authors have posed (Clough, 1979; Tuan, 1984; Mitchell and Thompson, 1986, 1990; Mechling, 1989; Shapiro, 1990; Cerulo, 2009). In particular, Jerolmack believes it possible to exchange inter-species meta-communicative signals, in a context which Goffman (1959) calls “social play” that is, a recreational activity the aim of which is not to beat the opponent (like in games where the prerequisite is a formal knowledge of the rules) but the sheer pleasure of being together and having fun (Jerolmack, 2009). The objective of sociable play is simply that of doing something together. It is non-instrumental, which requires only the ability to enjoy an autotelic recreational activity as an end in itself (Irvine, 2001, 2004).

Research into human-animal interplay shows that relationships with animals seek to satisfy human needs, such as to escape from everyday problems, a quest for amusement, sociability for sociability's sake. These areas of experience are gratifying, to the extent that people are convinced they experience something inter-subjectively authentic, the sole aim of which is emotional fulfilment. The study of play makes the sociologist aware of phenomena of empathy and affectivity.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to place oneself in someone else's situation, empathize and understand their mental processes. According to Quine (1990) empathy is possible thanks to "empathic simulation", seen as an exchange of roles, which makes us recognize in others the psychic aspects that we too possess. Empathy is a concrete immanent sensibility, rooted in a sense of belonging to something or someone (Braidotti, 2006; Shapiro, 2008); it is also an irreducibly personal and singular form of communication, independent of universal categories such as species (Flynn, 2008; de Waal, 2009).

Sociologists have noted the extent of empathic communication between humans and animals in certain sports, such as hunting and riding. As it turns out, sports involving animals are more structured than other kinds of play. The animal is not free, indeed very often it is even forced to follow strict rules, which severely limit its autonomy and prevent it from expressing itself freely. However, in certain contexts, some sports allow animals a certain degree of self-expression. For example, in hunting, the pace and aims of which are established exclusively by humans, a dog may be allowed to channel his predator instinct and satisfy his urge to run. The hunt, which is in effect a "job" for the animal, may be considered, in part, a team activity.

A strong degree of empathic communication has been detected between horses and riders. In equestrian culture, the different types of land conditions related to the various specialties (dressage, show jumping and cross-country), is conditioned also by physical human-animal empathy. To address the difficulties of certain terrains, it is necessary for riders and animals to construct a "shared identity", "we" capable of coordinating impromptu solutions required to overcome and problems arising suddenly during a particularly challenging course (Fuentes, 2006). Endurance races lasting many hours and measured in miles, are highly competitiveness and rife with pitfalls. The topography is complex: there are rivers, rocky terrain and expanses of fields and woodland to cross as well as steep slopes to climb. In this kind of equestrian trial, closer to the lifestyle of the wild horse and its need to cover vast natural areas, collaboration with the animal is an essential aspect of the experience: the difficulty and the danger that characterise it create an even closer and more intimate bond between horse and rider (Davis et al., 2013). Many choose equestrian disciplines because they permit them to create a deeper and more intimate relationship with the animal. This intimacy is necessary. When facing danger as a team it is important that a truly profound reciprocity, based on knowledge and trust, exist between the human and the animal. The success of their performance is closely rooted in their empathic

tie, because doubt or hesitation on the part of either when facing an obstacle can spell disaster for both.

Some authors associate empathic relationships with Darwinism, because the idea of evolution contains that of continuity and therefore partial identity between animals and humans. Other authors go even further and, while refusing the sociobiological explanation of human behaviour, suggest an even closer kinship with animals, especially dogs (Wolfe, 2008; de Waal, 2009; Maurstad, 2010; Johnson et al., 2011; Beck, 2014; Nagasawa et al., 2015). Whatever the origin of empathy between people and animals, social sciences correlates it with the affective dimension.

Affection

The term affection (from the Latin *affectus* and *afficere*) implies notions of feelings and emotions having the power to influence others and create ties. Affection connotes the psychological reactions of those who are in close relationship. For cognitive psychology, affection is a form of experience and knowledge.

Several studies show that the ontological insecurity of contemporary society, associated with anxiety caused by the incessant mobility of globalization and the weakening of traditional ties, is the basis of a quest by human beings for affection, often achieved by relating to animals. Pets become objects of love, surrogates and life companions because they are, maybe, the only beings capable of establishing relationships of mutual and definitely durable dependency (Franklin, 1999; Charles, 2014). Even Arluke and Sanders (2009), when they query the reasons that underlie the strengthening of the zoological connection, identify certain typical classes of necessity: the need for love and relating to a non-judgmental intermediary; the need to replace relationships with other humans (for example, in the case of widows and widowers), as the animals are usable others (Goffman, 1967); the need to arouse or lubricate sociability in other humans; the need to foster self-perception, self-evaluation and self-esteem.

These needs, along with empathy, are included in the concept of sociability, and explain why animals are perceived by their guardians remedies against the fatigue of life and as companions. They play together, talk with animal and for the animal interpreting its needs and point of view. The entire family is often involved in the relationship. Rituals are created and routine interactions codified. All the behaviours described imply not only the need to rethink the meaning of terms like “person”, “mind”, “culture”, but also that of overcoming to overcome barriers related to species and the formation of post-human families (Charles, 2014), which dissolve the boundaries between

humans and animals (Gieryn, 1995; Ritvo, 1995; Hoeyer and Koch, 2006; Furst, 2007; Harvey, 2007).

There exists a rebuttal of the social significance emotional relationships with animals is gaining in society, that is, the cruelty practiced in micro-social contexts, like the family (Flynn, 1999). This phenomenon is an ulterior indicator of the emotional component of sociability, because it strikes, by means of the animal, its guardian, the person intimately linked to it.

The target of acts of cruelty to animals is really their guardians because the torture of animals offends them, due to acknowledgement and recognition of the central role that sociability with animals plays when forging social cohesion and human identity (Ascione, 1993). Husbands who beat their wives, will unleash their anger against these women's animals (Flynn, 2000); abused children, in turn, abuse animals; paedophiles blackmail abused children by threatening their animals (DeViney et al., 1983; Flynn, 1999); offended or intolerant neighbours vent their ire on their neighbours' dogs (Beirne, 1995; Holmberg, 2014); teenagers rejected by their peers, or seeking to creating a tough image, torture animals (Miller and Knutson, 1997; Arluke et al., 1999). Observations of the practice of cruelty endorses the central role of close relationships when seeking to understand human-animal relations. In addition and to the contrary, they suggests that intimacy and familiarity with animals is the context where micro-practices of resistance take shape.

Sociability as a form of resistance

Forms of opposition and public resistance to speciesism are quite widespread in contemporary society (Singer, 1975; Franklin, 1999; Garner, 2005). Those who support animal rights and refuse to treat animals as sources of food, clothing, as research tools, for entertainment, have begun organising structured resistance movements, inspired by other movements which support the oppressed, the "different" and marginalized in all spheres of society: immigrants, the young, women, homosexuals, the exploited (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Lynch and Collins, 1998; Birke, 1994; Hovorka, 2015).

Animal-rights movements are characterized by public policy and are therefore obtain high visibility (Gaard, 1993; Munro, 2005; Rescigno, 2006; Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011). But private and intimate dimensions also exist where some research has documented overt strategies of resistance to the dominant culture of speciesism (Jasanoff, 2004). In total institutions, laboratories or shelters, operators often experience ambivalence - between ethical codes and empathy with animals - generating moral conflict (Hobson-West, 2007). This uneasiness may be seen as a context engendering practices of resistance: for example, naming guinea pigs or strays, treating them as

sentient entities, contrary to the everyday routine typical of these workplaces. Irvine (2001) is one of the first social scientists studying humans-animals relations to refer to Foucault's category of resistance, highlighting the fact that the power of dominant ideologies can be challenged by micro-practices and counter-power strategies (Foucault, 1981; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). These are characterized by role reversal, negotiating meaning and the redefinition of social constructs like race, gender, madness and otherness (Haraway, 1989). Irvine considers the interplay between humans and animals as a sheltered parenthesis, separate from the rest of the world, a very special and disconcerting experience: far from being mere pleasure and fun, play is actually a means by which to oppose dominant ideologies. In the face of a global culture, which defines animals as not-sentient inferiors, as tools useful to the workings of society, play acts objectively as a practical form of micro-resistance, where humans redefine relationship with animals, treating them as partners, not as underlings. Humans reverse similar representations of animals by recognizing their skills, emotions, intentions, and ability to establish satisfactory relations.

The ethnographical studies conducted by Irvine attribute a more complex value to the category of sociability: the reciprocal pleasure of sharing each other's company, typical of the autotelic being, an end in itself, undermines the ideological framework that justifies human domination over animals on the basis of their inferiority and diversity of species. According to Irvine, speciesism is rooted in the heart of everyday experience of animals and assumes three main forms: «resisting the notion of animal otherness (...) resisting trends to dominate other species (...) resisting the iron cage» (Irvine, 2001: 123-125).

Irvine's sociology emphasizes, on the one hand, the sense of frustration guardians feel towards devaluation of the animal world, a source of joy and fulfilment to them; on the other, the ability of the human-animal couple to counter global cultural homologation. But, above all, the results of this study corroborate the theory of the political value of daily life and sociability as a form of ransom.

Future trends in theory and research

Most social scientists engaged in this area of studies suggest that the questions asked by Bryant in 1979 have not been answered exhaustively (Scarce, 2000; Wipper, 2000; Kalof and Fitzgerald, 2003; Wilkie and Inglis, 2007). Scholars suggest that future research look deeply into:

- social relations accruing to human-animal connections;

- behavioural and social roles associated with animals;
- animal power struggles;
- cultural and symbolic models of which animals are the object.

In my opinion, besides in-depth investigation of these topics, two fields of study aimed at extending the scope of sociability are available to future research (Beck and Katcher, 2003).

Meso-sociability

It might prove useful to investigate the category of resistance in greater depth, extending it to a meso social level, that is, to groups, aggregations and communities. Between the individual experience play and the establishment of a collective movement there exists an intermediate step, a meso-sociological dimension of guardians, where sociability is broader in range and includes a greater number of relational networks (Clarke, 1991; Strauss, 1978, 1982; Shibutani, 1994; Konecki, 2007). These are not real social gatherings, but limited, transient and fluid practices of collective action, which may be called meso-sociability, forms of “social-world resistance”, which, though neither organized nor structured in movements, oppose everyday speciesism. In this sense, the emerging *bio-sociality* category (Pålsson, 2009), which refers to new types of social relationships, self-help and anti-discrimination groups, aggregating around a shared biological condition, appears useful.

Trans-sociability

Concepts like *trans-cultural*, *trans-species* (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 2007) are associated with Deleuze and Guattari's provocation (1988). “Becoming Animals” proposing the construction of human ecological awareness by practicing, instead of dominion, collaboration and an alliance with animals. This gave rise to research into the idea of human-animal cultural co-production (Despret, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Tannen, 2004; Laurier et al., 2006; Lorimer, 2008; Wells, 2012) as well as investigation of the relationship with the wild which is gradually exhausted or incorporated (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke, 2005; Hinchliffe et al., 2005). The boundary, surpassed in the home, thanks to the construction of the identity of the animal as companion, has also been overcome in social and urban life, due to the (utopic?) *zoopolis* perspective: an urban reality, seen as a trans-cultural place, inhabited by people and animals in harmony, devoid of hegemony or dominion (Wolch, 1998; Beck and Katcher, 2003). Furthermore, the trans-species imaginary stems

from objective data: cities are frequented to such an extent by wild animals that the terms “city”, and “wild” need to be redefined (Lynn and Sheppard, 2004; Braun, 2005; Hovorka, 2008). Further data show that close contact with wild animals is already a widespread phenomenon (Brownlow, 2000; Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Cloke and Perkins, 2005; Lulka, 2008, 2009; Porcher and Tribondeau, 2008; Lorimer, 2010; Buller, 2004, 2012; Kohler, 2012a; Hinchliffe and Lavau, 2013). Trans-sociability, of applied to research into contact with wild animals in urban areas, might help to describe the specific types and mechanisms of interactive, as yet unknown.

Open methodologies

In classic research, the post-Meadian interactionists and ethno-methodologists have conducted mostly ethnographies and auto-ethnographies.

As to future developments in research, what scholars seem to need most is to expand their multidisciplinary approach. The specialisations, with which sociologists will need to work more closely during future research, are: anthropology, behavioural psychology, geography, medicine (Garrity and Stallones, 1998; Bekoff et al., 2002; Haraway, 2003; Kohler, 2012b; Buller, 2014); but also ethnography, ethno-methodology, ethology, cognitive ethology and socio-biology (Serpell, 1996; Anderson, 1995, 1997; Pepper and Smuts, 1999; Kaminski et al., 2004; Lescureux, 2006; Lestel, 2006; Irvine, 2012).

At methodological level, social scientists hold that they need to improve their qualitative tools – among which visual techniques play a major role (Goode, 2006) - by integrating open, non-rigid techniques (Urbanik, 2012). Some innovative experiences might prove decisive for sociological animal studies:

- the “choreographic” technique (Pickering, 1995), where the researcher stands centre stage, to study the symmetry of the relationships between the actors, their progress, as if these were part of a choreography;
- the study of relationships over time, thus shifting the emphasis from spatial to temporal processes, and to the evolution of the relationship with the animal (Laurier et al., 2006);
- “materialist ethnography” (Braidotti, 2002; Schadler, 2014), which takes the material component of processes into account. According to this method, the social subjects do not exist before and outside of the process, but only within it. The actors are all those involved, including non-humans, animals and / or technological devices;

- the Actor Network Analysis methodology (Bloor, 1976; Callon, 1986; Murdoch, 2003; Latour, 2005; Fudge, 2006), which focuses on action, and includes observing all the actors involved, be they human, animal or technological.

Conclusions

The category of sociability seems particularly suited to the study of human-animal relationships, because it goes straight to the heart of identity-building mechanisms, and to human empathy with animals. It permits one to understand the ambivalence of human treatment of animals. In a collective context of inter-species violence, the close relationship between individual humans and animals is an element which undermines the dominant culture, because it fosters experiences that run counter to and clash with speciesism.

The sociability category provides an original observation point on the consequences of global phenomena. While the system of economic and political interests pervade all spheres of unwasteful society, imposing its rules globally, it intensifies the quest for spaces and moments of local autonomy. Subcultures, self-help countercultures expressing practices of resistance emerge. The more global culture crushes the planet's animal life, the more forms of sociability as resistance take root and spread.

Concluding, this study has identified the category of sociability as one of the key devices through which it is possible to deconstruct the narrative of human-animal relationships, while revealing the deep contradictions that characterize it. However, the choice of this guiding concept also comprises this work's chief theoretical and methodological limitations, since it has not been possible here to enlarge the category more effectively and provide greater details (beyond internal distinctions between macro, meso and micro – sociability). At this point it may simply recommend a more thorough investigation of the issue by future research. One particular task left to future research is the use of sociability as an indicator of resistant behaviour in contexts where contradictions are more strident, as in the cases of science laboratories, shelters for abandoned animals and veterinary surgeries, where “clandestine” empathic relations, extraneous to the dictates of production routines, are practiced, as well as in contexts where the suffering and / or death of an animal permits emotional attachment to surface.

The most promising future research areas will require investigation of the boundaries between humans and animals at various levels: from micro-, to meso- to trans-sociability. New methodologies that reappraise the time and space dimension, networks of inter-species actors and mixed human and non-human social processes, also emerge.

Finally, it should be noted that the heuristically useful category of sociability poses an unresolved question: what are the deep reasons which urge humans to seek animals thus entering into conflict with the social system? Despite sociological readings of the phenomenon, which establish a correlation with nature-culture, despite recent discoveries concerning the genome (inter-species for almost 99%), sociability remains largely unexplained. Future research needs to assume the task of discovering why because «this relationship can be hybrid or fused in ways not currently understood» (Arluke and Sanders, 2009: 28).

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