



Risk & Reward: The Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Women

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Sent 22 December 2006, Accepted 8 May 2007

Abstract

This qualitative study of 27 women animal activists examines the risks and rewards that accompany a commitment to animal rights activism. One of the common beliefs about animal rights activists is that their political choices are fanatic and unyielding, resulting in rigid self-denial. Contrary to this notion, the women in this study experienced both the pain and the joy of their transformation toward animal activism. Activism took an enormous toll on their personal relationships, careers, and emotional well being. They struggled as friendships ended and family relationships suffered; some experienced harassment and abuse as a result of their efforts. Yet the women were just as likely to extol the rewards and pleasure gained from their participation in the cause of animal liberation. These included a heightened awareness of political issues, greater self-confidence, the feeling that they were making a difference in the world, and the joy of living a “more meaningful life.”

Keywords

animal rights activism, social movements, relationships, participation, personal development

Introduction

One of the most striking characteristics of the animal rights movement in the United States is that women make up the majority of its activists (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002). Yet little is known about their experiences or how participation in the animal rights movement changes the lives of its activists. Thus, the central question of this article is how animal rights activism affects the lives of women activists.

This article examines the social and psychological consequences of participating in animal activism. I discuss how women’s activism affects their relationships with friends, work colleagues, family members, and intimate partners—as well as influencing career changes and personal choices. The ideology, lifestyle,

and actions involved with animal rights affect the lives of the women activists in a multitude of ways that are both frustrating and rewarding. The article concludes with the women's accounts of the benefits that animal rights activism brings to their lives. These include a heightened awareness of political issues, greater self-confidence, the feeling that they are making a difference in the world, and the joy of living a "more meaningful life."

Activist Biographies

This study is grounded in the "activist biography" visible within the study of new social movements (post-1960s movements). While biographical studies of activists were once a popular topic in the study of social movements, studies on the personal development of activists declined as more structural inquiries into resource mobilization and political process took hold (Flacks, 2002). Yet understanding the personal experiences of activists, including the effects that activism has on their lives (and how they interpret and respond to these effects), is critical for several reasons. First, explorations of how and why some people become engaged in non-conventional, sometimes risky activity offer insight into fascinating issues of human personality and challenges to hegemony (Flacks). A second—and related—issue is how activists respond to the risks and challenges of immersion into a social movement. This can lead to meaningful information for social activists; namely, how one sustains such a commitment over time. Finally, Flacks (2004) urges "closer attention to the roles, identities, biographies, and self-understandings of activists . . ." (p. 157) to better understand social movements as a whole.

Therefore, this work responds to the call for the return of biography as a key topic in social movement studies (Flacks, 2004; Jasper, 1997). It builds on the most recent examples of work grounded in the life experiences of social-movement activists and organizers (Andrews, 1991; Lipsitz, 1995; Whalen & Flacks 1989) as well as the small number of studies that specifically focus on the life experiences of animal rights activists (Herzog, 1993; Shapiro, 1994). Despite the rapid growth of the animal rights movement, little is known about the social and psychological consequences of participation in such a movement. This study contributes to our knowledge of the impact of animal rights activism on women activists, who represent the majority of this movement's participants.

Research Method

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, I determined that a qualitative approach was best suited to explore the depth of the activists' expe-

riences and how they described—and made sense of—the risks and rewards of their animal rights activism. Qualitative methods maximize a researcher's ability to understand the meaning, scope, and subjectivity of social situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Semi-structured interviewing has been used to great advantage in social-movement studies to illuminate how activists regard their participation, understand their social world, and construct collective and individual identities (Blee & Taylor, 2002).

This study was conducted using 27 interviews with women animal-rights activists and participant observation of various aspects of the animal rights movement: organizations, protests, and conferences. Using purposive and snowball sampling to locate potential interviewees, I completed the interviews over a period of two years (July 2002-July 2004). I made my initial contacts through a local animal rights group in which I participated. I conducted the first three interviews with women in that group, and they gave me names and contact information for other women activists they knew. I also found contacts by "putting the word out" in other activist circles with which I was involved: environmental, peace, and anti-globalization groups. I obtained contact information for one participant by checking a prisoner's list posted on an animal rights website. Finally, I conducted 14 of the interviews while attending the 2003 Animal Rights National Conference in Los Angeles, California. At the conference, I approached some women randomly and chose others specifically—because she had made a provocative or interesting comment during a session; because she was the only African-American woman at the conference. Although I sought to include activists from diverse backgrounds and with differing opinions, my sampling techniques resulted in certain limitations to the study. My selection of participants was contingent upon those to whom I had access and, in some cases, whose comments I wanted to capture; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the experiences of all women animal-rights activists. The activists who appear in this study were also motivated to participate in the interviews: No one I approached ever refused an interview.

The average length of the interviews ran two hours. I conducted the interviews in a variety of settings—my home, the participant's home, restaurants, coffee shops, and hotel lobbies. With the exception of the incarcerated women mentioned above and one additional interview conducted both by electronic and postal mail, all interviews were conducted in person, tape-recorded, and transcribed by me. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

I interviewed women from varying backgrounds, age groups, and areas of the country. Like the majority of animal rights activists (Jamison, 1998), almost all the women (22) were white. Five were women of color. The participants varied in age from 17 to 90 years. Nine of the activists were currently married or with a long-term partner. The remaining 18 women were single

(one was widowed; two were divorced). Three of the women had children, and almost all lived with at least one animal in the household.

They held a range of occupations: teachers, writers, accountants, lawyers, and restaurant workers. Many worked in animal organizations. The majority had at least some college, and six held postgraduate degrees. This is consistent with other studies of the animal rights movement, which have determined that its activists tend to have much higher levels of education than the population as a whole (Jamison, 1998; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002). Although I did not inquire about income levels, their employment histories suggest that almost all were middle class (with the exception of some of the younger activists who were still in some type of schooling). Again, this is consistent with other work that identifies the majority of animal rights participants as middle class (Jamison, 1998; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002).

Findings

In the sections below, I detail the risks and rewards that accompany a commitment to animal rights activism. The women in this study were deeply affected by their identity and work as activists. Activism took an enormous toll on their personal relationships, careers, and emotional well being; yet they were just as likely to highlight the pleasure gained from their participation.

Making Personal Changes: Living Cruelty-free

Although some observations of the animal rights movement (Galvin & Herzog, 1992; Plous, 1991) have noted inconsistencies between the professed beliefs and actual behaviors of activists (such as wearing fur or eating meat), other studies have documented the moral consistency of such activists. Both Jasper and Nelkin's (1992) and Sperling's (1988) accounts of the movement suggest that almost all work hard to live in accordance with their animal rights beliefs. They tend to be vegetarian or vegan, eschew leather and fur, and purchase cosmetics and household products that are cruelty-free (not tested on animals). They often utilize alternative medicine in protest of pharmaceutical products tested on animals. As Herzog (1993) concludes, animal rights activism usually entails major changes in lifestyle, as activists strive "to achieve consistency between their ideals and actions" (p. 103).

The majority of women activists in this study undertook serious lifestyle changes in line with their animal rights philosophy. One of the most prominent changes occurred in their diets. Of the 27 women in this study, 20 were vegan, and 5 identified as vegetarian. Some found that changing their diet was

fairly simple after they “got the hang of things.” Vegan or vegetarian diets involved intense efforts and challenges for others.

Although Amie found being vegetarian “pretty easy,” she remarked, “I think it is hard to be vegan. If I just lived in my apartment and never went out, it’s very easy.” Amie explained, “You go to a restaurant and you don’t know if there is butter on the noodles or egg, and you try asking and they don’t know.” Amie gave another example of going to a friend’s barbeque on the Fourth of July. Her friends “bought veggie burgers just for me, but then they’re not vegan.”

Irene pointed out the lack of vegan or vegetarian options in elder communities—hospitals, nursing, and retirement homes. At 90 years of age, Irene was concerned that she and other older vegans/vegetarians would have no access to such foods in care facilities or programs like Meals on Wheels. She commented, “When I was in the hospital, I couldn’t get a vegetarian meal. Finally they came with a baked potato. I couldn’t even get a veggie burger.”

Shana ate the eggs from chickens who lived on her property and drank milk from her neighbor’s goat. She was firmly against all factory farming and ate no meat but did not disagree with other people eating animals who were at the end of their natural lives—because she saw this as “part of the flow of life on earth.”

Erin did not believe there was necessarily “only one moral way” to eat. Several women in the study emphasized the importance of environmental and cultural contexts. This matches the call by some ecofeminists for a “cross-cultural feminist ethics” when discussing the use of animals by native cultures (Gaard, 2001).¹ For instance, Erin was not against hunting if it was “done in a certain way.” Although she remarked, “I could never do that,” she outlined her belief in “contextual vegetarianism and veganism”:

There are certain contexts where it’s appropriate and in others it’s not. There are certain people who live in an environment where you cannot grow plants. My standard for what a context is to be vegan is that if you live in an industrialized country and you have access to veggie burgers, you probably shouldn’t eat meat.

Activists struggled with how far they should go in eliminating animal products from their lives. Yvonne immediately threw out—or gave away—all the animal products in her house, including food, toiletries, leather coats and luggage. Marie, on the other hand, wondered if her new transition to veganism meant that she should use up the current animal products she owned but not purchase any new ones (“I was like, wait, do I just throw out all the stuff I already have? Because the animals have already been killed . . .”). Zoey pointed out that some of the synthetic products used in place of leather were non-biodegradable and bad for the environment. Using the skin of an

animal who reached the end of life by natural means, she suggested, was a possible exception to the standard of using no animal products.

The women also struggled over utilizing different types of health care. Many used naturopathic or homeopathic doctors and remedies to prevent and heal illnesses. Some were more strict than others in this regard. Although facing the various aches and pains of old age, Irene refused to use “vivisection medicine,” relying on “herbs and nothing else.” Sue took a pragmatic view of the matter. Although she did not visit medical doctors often, she remarked, “If you don’t take the medication and you’re not around to fight the battle, then everybody loses.”

Katie had a painful medical condition that caused her to occasionally visit the hospital and take pain medication. She was conflicted over her use of conventional medical treatment; however, she noted:

Like my friend once said, it’s not about keeping yourself pure, it’s about . . . practicing respect for all life. If you must take a painkiller . . . it’s not the end of the world. I agree with her, but still feel bad when I have to.

Household items seemed to present fewer challenges for the activists because of the amount of information and “guides” to cruelty-free companies and products—as well as the multitude of cosmetic, hygienic, and cleaning alternatives available on the market.

Some observers of animal activists have labeled veganism as rigid self-denial codified in strict guidelines and rules. Jamison, Wenk, and Parker’s (2000) view of animal rights as “functional religion” characterizes activists’ lifestyle choices as deriving from “conversion” experiences, normative creeds, and well-defined “codes of behavior” (p. 317). They describe veganism as “an elaborate superstructure” (p. 317) that borders on asceticism.

Based on the interviews I conducted, I assert that such characterizations are somewhat exaggerated and lack an important context voiced by the women in this study. Several women accepted certain contexts in which the use of animal products seemed appropriate. Furthermore, although it presented challenges, veganism was not generally viewed as “self-denial” by activists. Veganism was more likely seen as a rejection of mindless consumer culture and a positive expression of healthy living and respect for life. Furthermore, several of the women viewed the moral dilemmas presented by animal rights philosophies as stimulating to their mind and spirit. Although their struggle for moral consistency could be frustrating or guilt-provoking, they also gained pleasure from educating themselves on issues, investigating alternatives, and “opening their minds” to new possibilities.

Emotional Labor

Working on animal rights issues involved complex emotional negotiations and invoked intense reactions from those outside the movement. These activists invested a great deal of time and energy on animal causes. They participated in a variety of activities—from protests to publicity drives to the direct care of abused or abandoned animals. When they spent time on other kinds of activities, they sometimes felt guilty that they were not working on animal issues. This theme is not unique to animal rights, as evidenced by studies of other social movements. For instance, feminist activists report emotional exhaustion and guilt as they negotiate a feminist identity and politic in the mainstream world (Hercus, 1999). An exploration into the lives of peace activists found that emotional exhaustion sometimes led to a depressive state that Kendrick (1991) described as “running out of gas” (p. 106).

The activists in this study frequently described their work as highly emotional and exhausting. Hochschild’s (1983) groundbreaking work on emotional labor highlights the costs and benefits of managing emotion in private life and work, particularly for women.² Just as respondents in Hochschild’s study spoke of “. . . *trying not* to feel depressed, of *checking* their anger, of *letting* themselves feel sad” (p. 13), these women activists spoke of managing their feelings to avoid burnout and maintain a healthy personal life.

When asked how her life had changed since she became involved in animal activism, Ricki answered,

“A lot more headaches. And a lot more frustrations in my day.” She explained, “Vivisection is not a fun issue. You have to get down to the horrible situation of suffering animals.” Shana echoed this thought, contending, “The hardest part of this job is understanding how it’s unending. As many animals as you help, there are going to be those that you can’t help.”

Diane acknowledged “feeling down” when pondering certain animal problems where “you start to think I’m not even making a dent.” She explained,

Let’s say we have a great week and we do eight quality adoptions. . . . But then I realize that all it takes is one litter. . . . There are eight kittens that are probably not going to get spayed and neutered, and it’s just endless.

The feeling of “no matter what I do, it’s never enough” was common among the activists, no matter the issues on which they focused. They invested a great deal of emotional energy in learning about, and then responding to, various animal injustices. The women felt drained by the magnitude of work yet to be done, a phenomenon Groves (1997) also documented. Graves noted that

taking part in animal campaigns helped activists address their feelings of guilt and despair; however, it also exacerbated those emotions because of the overwhelming sense that there was so much to do.

Along these same lines, Shapiro (1994) identifies animal rights activists as “caring sleuths”—those who dedicate themselves to seek and expose animal suffering. He writes:

Moreover, sleuth work is insidious, for it is difficult to stop seeking. What begins as a certain sensibility to suffering crystallizes into an avocation—volunteering at the local shelter—then becomes a vocation and, finally, turns into a way of life. Without intending it, the animal rights activist finds that she is increasingly and, eventually, perpetually on call. (p. 158)

Once activists learn about the seemingly endless examples of animal suffering, it is hard to tune out or turn off. Whether at the grocery store, the shopping mall, the office barbeque, or their doctor or pharmacy, they saw the mark of animal abuse everywhere. Subsequently, some activists talked about occasionally “turning off” their sleuthing receptors to recharge their energies.

In an effort to balance her life, Diane established an emotional “threshold” to block out the constant array of animal issues. Her threshold included “shutting down sometimes to recharge.” She exclaimed, “I can’t listen to all of it. I have to still live in this world, unfortunately!” Diane filtered out information and acted on those issues where she felt she could make a real difference. She asserted,

It can seem like everything you do is wrong or has a consequence. The best I can do is think globally, act locally. I don’t want to get so overwhelmed that I just stop listening, I stop moving ahead.

The women described the emotional turmoil of animal work and dealing with the knowledge of so much animal suffering. Abby recalled, “During high school, when I was trying to immerse myself in everything there was to know about it, I got really depressed, really overwhelmed.” She reflected, “I think it’s taken a lot of hard work on my part to get to a place of accepting everything and doing as much as I can.”

Some women also discussed the impact that law enforcement had on activists involved with animal rights. One woman was followed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) because she had started an anti-vivisection group that was publicly supportive of the Animal Liberation Front. Katie, a young activist who was incarcerated for her actions against animal experimentation, spoke emphatically about not letting it limit her activism. She remarked,

“It’s also very important, I think, that the animal rights movement never slows down just because they throw a couple people in jail. That’s what they’re trying to do—make an example of us.”

Frances had a great deal to say about the emotional intensity of animal work and the personal repercussions she had suffered as a result. One of these was harassment; specifically, the mysterious poisoning of her family’s two dogs. Frances and her husband ran a foster home and adoption program out of their personal residence. This came to an abrupt end when tragedy struck:

Our two dogs, both rescues—Tripod (with three legs) and Bear—were murdered by a person or persons unknown. Our dogs . . . did not eat meat and therefore had no access to bones. Steak bones soaked in anti-freeze were tossed over the back fence, and Tripod was the first to go. Anti-freeze destroys the kidneys, and after a five-day hospitalization, during which the vets could not determine what was causing the continuing renal failure, he was euthanized. . . . Three months later, a person or persons did it again, this time getting the second dog, Bear, with the same result.

Unsurprisingly, Frances spoke empathetically about the need for coping mechanisms in the life of an animal activist. She struggled seriously with the emotional fallout of her all-encompassing animal activism. When I asked her to discuss how her life had changed since becoming an activist, she gave a solemn reply:

The changes are profound. I had found my life’s work, and I threw myself into it with a vengeance. It affected everything in our lives, because I was so driven to do something—anything—just to let people know what I knew they didn’t. I became extremely angry and rageful. Eventually I had to see a counselor to deal with all the horrors I saw or read about, but could not cope with.

Frances and her husband divorced after 22 years. Frances commented, “He couldn’t take the intensity any longer.” He also became frightened after their beloved dogs were poisoned and believed the household was in danger of continued and escalated harassment. Frances discussed the impact her work had on her family over the years:

I ignored my growing children in favor of the foster home—collecting animals, animal rights, public speaking, protests, civil disobediences, arrests and running animal rights organizations. I didn’t attend their sports events as I should have as a parent; I was in court the day my younger daughter had knee surgery. Basically, they grew up without a mother. I became filled with rage for the people who killed and hurt animals. It was not until the rage boiled over and I submitted to counseling to get my life back that I learned what my personal boundaries had to be . . .

After seeking counseling, Frances scaled back her activism to manageable proportions. She still attends protests, organizes, writes letters, and observes boycotts. At the age of 63, however, she said comically that her physical limitations no longer enable her to “leap tall buildings in a single bound.” Just a few years ago, Frances was arrested for demonstrating on top of a Wendy’s fast-food restaurant counter. She and her husband eventually reconciled, and she remarked, “He comes for me when I go to jail, but I don’t operate on the scale I once did.”

Today, Frances takes it on herself to talk to other animal activists about her personal struggles. When she meets someone new to animal rights, or is asked for advice, she tells them “to examine carefully their existing coping skills.” She continued, “If they are lacking, as mine were, I tell them to get psychological counseling before coming on board. Eventually, if they remain active and committed, they will need the help!”

Friendships

One of the ways that activists coped with the angry, melancholy or overwhelming aspects of animal issues was to seek out like-minded individuals and groups. As Shapiro (1994, p. 162) points out, “...activists have a sense of belonging, of sharing common values and purpose” as members of the animal rights community.

Ricki laughed while admitting, “it seems like all my friends these days are animal activists!” She felt a sense of camaraderie with other animal activists, noting,

We’re all on the same page. It’s easy to talk about issues. Or if I get frustrated, I can share with them... We can also share our victories when we get them.

For Ricki, her relationships with other activists went beyond friendship. They shared the same values and struggle and thus understood Ricki’s frustration, sadness, and anger. This was an important coping mechanism for other women as well—the supportive presence of an activist circle.

While activists celebrated their new friendships, there was also a sense of loss when it came to relationships that were left behind. Herzog’s (1993) study of activists found that many had friendships that did not survive the person’s transformation into animal activism. About half of the women in this sample had similar experiences. Joanne lost her best friend of 11 years after tuning in to animal issues and activism.

Other women discussed the tensions that ensued as a result of their activism. Amie had many good friends who were involved in other types of activism but were less enthusiastic about animal rights. Amie stated,

... they're involved in that, they still eat meat, and it's okay for them to talk about all these issues, but if I start bringing up stuff, they kind of get annoyed or uncomfortable. . . . They ask me questions sometimes, but then there is a certain point where they say, okay, you can stop talking, because I don't want to hear it anymore.

Amie felt the pressure to “drop it” when things became too heated or awkward with her friends.

Jamison, Wenk, and Parker's (2000) research affirms that activists sometimes face ostracism and scorn from family and friends as they try to share their newfound beliefs or lifestyle choices. For instance, Marianna's Mexican friends sometimes accused her of “being whitened” by her work with the animal rights movement. Marianna spoke of her feelings:

I often feel—people have even told me—like my husband's friends. . . . In Spanish they say—because of my [animal rights] stickers and everything—they think that I'm whitened, I guess you could say. When my husband says he doesn't eat meat, they're like, your wife got you into the white thing.

E.G: Why do they think it's a white thing?

Marianna: . . . As Chicanos, we're not American like white people, but we're not Mexican like people living in Mexico. It's like you have to fill this gap. We live here and it's this new deal. But they hold onto traditional things, like the patriarchy, and the meat-eating, and the cock fighting, and the dog fighting. I think it's part of holding onto traditions, because otherwise they lose part of their world. . . . like this is me—I'm proud, you know? When I bring up animal stuff, they're like—it's a white world thing. We're not white; we're sticking with our deal.

Despite this, Marianna was determined to carve out new cultural traditions and space for herself. She noted, “I also have a lot of Hispanic friends who are *not* like that” and rejected the idea that animal rights was incompatible with her cultural background.

Marie's identity as both a lesbian and an animal rights activist was also sometimes challenged by her circle of friends. It was suggested to her that being associated with animal rights would give gays and lesbians a bad name—it was “hippy-like” and too much out of the mainstream. “I have friends who say things like, ‘that's naïve’ or ‘just what we need—more granola munching lesbians!’” When she encountered hostility from her friends over her views on animal issues, she tried to respond with humor. Marie laughed when delivering her usual reply: “I tell them, well, someone has to be ethically responsible, why not the lesbians?”

Although some women found it easier to mainly associate with other animal activists, others mentioned the importance of having friendships outside this circle. In step with Herzog's (1993) study, I found that some of the women

activists made conscious efforts to sustain their old friendships. For example, Frances spoke affectionately about her social circle. Although not all her friends were vegan or vegetarian, they accepted her beliefs and respected them:

Once, four of us women took a week's trip to the Caribbean. Two of us were vegans, the others were flesh eaters. But for the week we were together, all the meals were vegan. This was something they, independently and without discussion, had decided before or as we were shopping for our home-cooked meals. I thought it was a loving thing to give to the other vegan and myself.

Being in the presence of other vegans or animal activists provided important camaraderie and emotional support for the women, but friendships with people outside this community served an essential function as well. It allowed them to retain special relationships in their lives and helped negate the feeling of being an outsider in society. Zoey also actively worked to make animal rights accessible to people through her activities in other kinds of circles. She tried hard to maintain friendships with people who weren't activists "so that I won't get sucked into a little clique of people who can't associate with anyone in the outside world..." As Shapiro (1994) notes,

... if this sense of community can offset the disaffection often felt with respect to larger society, it also has its pitfalls. It may result in a heightening of insularity, and consequently, in diminished effectiveness through a pattern of preaching to the converted. (p. 162)

Zoey echoed this sentiment, asserting that one of the problems she saw with the animal rights movement is that it's "sort of closed off." She had once lived within an animal rights community in a large city and was disappointed by the insularity of the local movement, where "some of the animal rights people only talk to each other." While Zoey acknowledged that part of this was due to "security culture" (caution regarding outsiders who may be infiltrating your organization), her predominant thought was that it isolated activists and hurt recruitment. Zoey worked to combat this by networking with other social justice groups and maintaining friendships with people outside animal rights.

Co-workers

The challenges and difficulties women experienced with friends carried over into the workplace. Amie, who worked in customer service for an airline,

sometimes encountered difficulty dealing with the conversations of her co-workers:

I will get people who talk about their mom's recipe for pork chops, and they go on describing it. But if I act like that bothers me, then they think that I'm the one who is causing the problem.

Yvonne consistently worked to educate her colleagues at the telephone company where she worked. She clipped articles out of newspapers and magazines, printed out items from the internet, and read items out loud. When her co-workers expressed interest, she encouraged them to write letters to companies and congressional representatives.

Frances also took it upon herself to talk with co-workers about animal issues. She was uncomfortable with proselytizing; rather, she was a firm believer in education through example. For instance, people would often approach her over lunch to find out what she was eating and specifically, whether she was "cheating." Frances commented, "I would patiently explain to them that 'cheating' implied that I was making some kind of sacrifice." She told them, "...All I had to do was focus on that poor animal in a slaughterhouse, and it was no sacrifice to give up some morsel that was the result of unbearable suffering..."

Ida faced a big challenge as a veterinarian student who was also an animal rights activist. She had agonized over the interview for veterinary school because she was afraid they would ask a question related to animal rights. Fortunately, she did not have to answer any "touchy" subjects in that area ("because it's against my religion to lie and I feel strongly about telling the truth"), and she was accepted into school on her first try. Ida considered herself lucky, "because they do discriminate against animal rights sympathizers. There's no doubt about that." She went on to discuss her difficulties with the administration and her fellow students:

I got into vet school the summer after I had attended the animal rights conference in D.C.... I was passionate about being an activist, and I plastered my locker outside the vet school classroom with all these different stickers—Go Vegan; Love Animals, Don't Eat Them; Abuse an Animal, Go to Jail. Six weeks into the quarter, I got called into the dean's office because apparently some of my classmates had come and complained that they were offended by them. This was the beginning of a long series of struggles that I had to endure, and still do endure as a vet student... I tend to be really outspoken—always raising my hand and saying things, sometimes to my classmates' dismay. But I speak my mind and that's the way it is.

Although Ida was adamant about speaking her mind, she sometimes suffered the consequences at a very personal level. She confessed that “there are definitely times when I feel very alone, depressed, frustrated, and just sick of everything!” After some time in vet school, Ida found it necessary to make certain compromises in order to cope socially and emotionally:

Before I got into vet school, I wore vegan t-shirts almost all of the time and everywhere I went. I was ready to whip out a “Why Vegan?” pamphlet at a moment’s notice and tell them why going vegan was great for their health, good for the animals, and great for the planet. But all that has changed since entering vet school. Personally, it’s very oppressive to be in an environment where I can’t be who I am. I guess I’ve had to make some compromises in some ways just to survive and get by.

This made it all the more important for Ida to be connected to other animal rights activists or vegans. Earlier, Ida noted that although she had a wide circle of friends, she appreciated the basic level of understanding she shared with other vegans. This was in direct contrast to her life in vet school, where she “can’t be who I am.”

Family

Ruby had a positive reception from her family, friends, and co-workers regarding her work with animals. Almost all “have been very interested in it, and they’ve actually learned a lot from me.” Amie considered herself lucky that she had support from her family. With regard to her diet, she commented, “You hear stories of people’s families who would tease them at the table. My family never did that. My mom would make vegetarian things every dinner we had.”

Although Frances was 63 years old, her parents were still dismayed by her activism. As Frances put it, “They do not like seeing me in handcuffs.” The frustration ran both ways in the family. Although she appreciated her parents’ serving only vegan meals to her and her family, she felt disappointed at her inability to change their eating habits, “no matter how I argue for humanitarianism, world hunger, health, or the environment.”

Katie, on the other hand, experienced mostly supportive reactions. Under her influence, her brother turned vegetarian and, when Katie was in jail, her mother began leaning toward veganism. Initially upset with Katie after her arrest, Katie’s mother eventually began to support the cause of animal rights and even became active in jail support campaigns for Katie and her co-defendants, and in demonstrations against animal testing.

In contrast to Katie, some of the younger activists in particular, encountered resistance from their parents regarding their activism or vegan/vegetarian

diets. While Zoey's father would cook vegetarian meals with her, he would usually repeat the same tired joke, "This would be *really* good with meat in it!" While growing up, Anika's parents thought her diet "was a whim," and she offered a recent example she found irritating: "My dad was helping me move recently, and at the end of it all, I commented that I was tired. And he said, oh, it must be your diet!" Others mentioned family or friends who would lie about the presence of meat in food dishes. Although Abby's mother always cooked vegetarian for her, her father thought it was "really funny to trick me all the time."

Other reactions from parents fell more into the category of worrying—*anxiety* over their children's health (you're not getting enough protein), illegal activities (I can't believe you're in jail), or livelihood (how will you make a career out of animal activism). Although Jacqueline had a law degree, her parents had concerns about her "devoting my whole career to animal law or advocacy, because it's a hard way to survive and make money." Marianna's father worried that, to the detriment of her own needs, she spent too much money rescuing animals.

Intimate Relationships

The majority of women were currently married to, partnered with, or only dated people who shared similar values about animals. For these women, animal activism did not present a problem (their partners were either active themselves or supported their beliefs and actions). Herzog's (1993) study found that 8 of the 23 activists whom he interviewed reported that they had supportive spouses or partners; however, 7 of the participants indicated that their activism caused major problems in their intimate relationships. Likewise, Jamison, Wenk, and Parker (2000) found that some activists attributed their divorces to their newfound beliefs or commitment to animal rights.

In this study, two women mentioned that disagreements over their animal activism (or attitudes toward animals more generally) contributed to their divorces. Furthermore, the single women whom I interviewed stated their unwillingness to date people who did not like animals. The reasoning behind this was similar to comments they made regarding their choice of friends. They wanted to share their lives with people who held common beliefs and feelings about animals. As Diane put it, "I guess I'm no longer willing to partner with someone who doesn't like animals. To me, there's a missing link there and animals are a huge part of my world."

Robin echoed the changes that Diane had made concerning her relationships with men. When Robin starting immersing herself in animal work, she

was married to a man who “didn’t quite feel about animals the way I did.” In fact, he was critical of her involvement with investigating animal experiment protocols. Robin recalled, “He was like, that’s none of your business. Stay out of it. What do you care?” Robin said adamantly, “When we got divorced, it was on the top of the list to find somebody that—you know—not date anyone that didn’t feel the way I did about animals.” She explained, “Animals are very important to me and I like to surround myself with people that feel the same way.”

Career

Six of the women voluntarily gave up established careers (or career paths) to devote themselves to animal work. Women who changed careers usually took drastic pay cuts. One abandoned a promising career as a concert pianist to devote herself to animal issues. Irene had completed a college degree but gave up paid work altogether, stating, “I made a choice to work for animals instead.” Irene explained,

I had several very good offers, but you know what? You see all those brown eyes crying in the labs... you have to have somebody willing to work on this. Other people had fancy houses and fancy clothes and all of that. We lived very frugally.

Bonnie left a well-paid corporate job when she realized that occasional volunteering was not enough for her. She felt a strong pull to redirect her energy into the new realms of animal and environmental issues she was discovering:

I took a leave of absence at first just to sort of think about all this, but then I decided to leave... I did what most people would consider very foolish, financially. People thought I had lost my mind—like, you know, are you going to save the whales? When they said, how can you walk away from all of this? It was just a leap of faith.

In addition to the women who made choices to abandon or change careers, one woman involuntarily lost her postdoctoral position as a biomedical researcher—a result, she suspects, of her advocacy work involving animal experimentation. Robin was doing cancer research in a postdoctoral position when she received a pamphlet from a local animal group discussing animal experimentation. Robin “sent in my donation as usual and scribbled off a little letter that I was in cancer research, and if I could help in any way, I would.” Robin received a phone call asking for help in reading over current investigative materials regarding a research protocol. She agreed and discovered multiple problems with the research. She then wrote a letter to a group of people

who donated heavily to the institute associated with the research. Here she discussed the impact it had on her position at the university

... Then I got a nice letter from the P.I. [principal investigator] on the project. He also sent a letter to my direct supervisor. He sent a letter to the head of my pathology department, and I believe, the head of the cancer center! So he didn't like my review at all! Yeah, so the letter—I think it was damaging to me at the university level, and you know... I would not go after any researcher that was doing legitimate, proper work... But I think I scared a lot of people, because it's like—oh no, here she is going after someone in animal testing. Ultimately, they decided not to renew my contract. Now I was told it had nothing to do with this, but I don't quite believe that!

Although Robin was initially upset by this, she eventually found a teaching job at the university level and discovered that she enjoyed it more than the environment of a research center. Robin did not regret the choices she made on behalf of animals and found greater fulfillment in the career change that resulted from her activism. This sense of satisfaction and “fulfillment” was echoed by many women in the study, an outlook I explore in the final section.

A More Meaningful Life: Becoming a Political Actor

The emotional toll that activism placed on relationships, career, and mental health was certainly enormous. Yet animal activism also engendered positive personal changes in the lives of women. When I asked Yvonne how her life had changed, she replied definitively:

Well, I'll put it to you this way. I used to weigh 523 pounds, and my boyfriend and I on a Sunday morning would split a carton of eggs and a pound of cheddar cheese and the only thing I knew how to cook was steak—besides a great omelet... I came home after the first [protest] letter I wrote and the realization, and I threw away every Proctor and Gamble product in my house—which was a lot. But it became so easy—so easy. I gave away all the food in my freezer—had everyone come over and take it away. I guess because it was so here [she points to her heart] that it was so easy.

Yvonne was able to accomplish major life changes because of her heightened political awareness. She had no regrets about the changes that animal rights activism brought to her life, asserting, “I feel that I'm just happier and healthier and maybe a little more accepting of things and people, but yet so much more aware. It's definitely been a change for the better; no two ways about it.”

Cassandra's life changed both materially and emotionally as a result of her growing awareness. She maintained, “It's adjusted my value system. The more

you learn about one issue—it makes me value animal life, including humans, and environmental issues more.” She continued,

I no longer attach to my stuff. I use old stuff. I recycle. . . . I don't care if the cats throw up on my bathroom rug. This is a total switch from my yuppie lifestyle, where everything had to look just so.

On a more personal level, Cassandra felt a sense of freedom and possibility. This included a divorce from a husband who disliked animals, and subsequently, the joy and healing garnered from living with companion animals in her home. She noted that in the past, “I gave up myself and my ethics and my values to please another person.” She discussed the positive effect that animals had in helping her to heal from past abuse:

My independence has become very valuable to me. I can have as many animals as I can afford! I can rescue animals and I can live in a way that accommodates that. I get my nurturing and my nurturing touch from my animals and it's safe. And you see, safety for me is a big deal. You can see why it would be.

Cassandra compared her life “before and after” activism and concluded that she was much happier being educated and active around social justice issues. This was a common theme among the women. Ricki expressed, “Most people just go through life and work and earn money and eat and sleep. They're not doing anything. They're nothing but zombies. And that may be normal, but who wants to be a zombie?” Ricki was grateful for the changes that her heightened awareness and activism brought to her life. She described her life as “more rewarding” since her involvement with activism. “When we got rid of pound seizure in my city, it was a wonderful feeling.” She ended by saying, “I have a lot of respect for what I do.” The pride that Ricki felt as a result of her activism gave important meaning to her life.

Ruby reported more self-confidence as she assumed leadership of a group she helped create. She commented, “I've never really done anything like that period—trying to lead when I'm not a natural-born leader.” Irene also gained confidence in her abilities as an organizer and political force. When she formed her first animal group, she “didn't know beans about running an organization or anything like that.” Soon she was appearing regularly at the legislature, “which I had never done before in my life—to lobby for animals.”

Joanne talked about the amount of education and self-esteem she had gained since tuning into “animals and the planet.” Her involvement in animal issues also led her to participate in the political process. Although Joanne did not usually vote, she intended to cast her ballot in an upcoming election to

support a pro-animal rights candidate. Learning about animal issues also led Joanne to environmental issues. She reported with great enthusiasm that she had just started recycling a month ago and was now,

... totally gung-ho, because I never did it before... I guess people... think that the public knows, but I'm not one of those people who just knew. So I was really glad to get the information and now I'm recycling like crazy.

Now when Joanne has questions about various products or activities, she researches the issues and makes informed decisions—an empowering experience for her. She added, “I love the fact that I have the power to be responsible.” Joanne’s life was changing for the better; she felt more self-confident and knowledgeable about the world around her and, above all, empowered to act on her beliefs.

The new-found empowerment that activism can bring has also been documented in women’s participation in other social movements. Maggard’s (1998) account of Appalachian women’s union organizing found that many emerged from the strike with new identities—as educated, self-confident, political actors. Women who took part in the strike later reflected upon their surprise at taking part in activities they had previously never dreamed of. This sentiment was also expressed by some of the animal activists. Like the Appalachian union activist who remarked, “I still say it’s the best thing that ever happened to me” (Maggard, p. 303), the women in this study seemed to agree that their lives had become more enriched and meaningful since becoming animal activists.

Conclusions

The “activist biographies” detailed in this paper offer insight into the impact that animal rights activism has on women who participate in the movement. The women activists in this study strove to enact changes in their personal lives that were consistent with their beliefs about the rights of animals. Some of these choices were easier than others. Diet and health care presented particular challenges, and the activists put serious thought into these issues. The women also debated over “how much was enough” when it came to avoiding animal products. The expressed beliefs and ultimate goals of animal rights activists call for extraordinary levels of personal commitment (Groves, 1997; Herzog, 1993; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Sperling, 1988). At the same time, the women were less likely to focus on the restrictions of such a commitment. Rather, they saw it as a meaningful opportunity for personal change, political

awareness, and the development of a more satisfying moral compass for their lives. They resisted many institutional sites of power by choosing cruelty-free food and products, engaging in protests and other activism, and developing alternative ethical and political frameworks for their lives.

As these activists' stories illustrate, the multitude of animal issues could easily feel overwhelming, as if the work they did was "never enough." The emotional labor involved in animal activism required activists to adopt coping strategies to stay personally healthy and politically motivated. Some—who described supportive networks of friends, colleagues, and family—also had to develop ways to deal with resistance from the aforementioned groups as well as outsiders and law enforcement. These challenges took many forms, from good-natured teasing to more extreme forms such as job termination or the murder of one's animals.

All the women had experienced some form of resistance by people outside the movement who questioned, expressed concern over, or actively sabotaged their diets, beliefs, and actions. Many women felt frustrated by constantly having to explain or defend their views. They employed various strategies to cope with this: employing humor, making compromises in terms of when and where to engage in discussions, and—sometimes—ending relationships or limiting contact with people who did not respect their beliefs.

Working as an animal activist instilled confidence and self-esteem in many of the women. Some expressed pride in their accomplishments and ability to make a difference in the lives of animals. Others discovered that they had leadership abilities, publicity skills, or political clout. Joanne, for example, had never voted before becoming an animal activist. Irene, who had never visited the legislature, found the motivation and confidence to begin regularly lobbying on behalf of animals.

I was also struck by a theme that occurred in multiple narratives—a marked change of consciousness about the world and one's place in it. As Joanne put it, "It was like an awakening..." The younger activists spoke of feeling alienated by mainstream cultural or religious values. They sought alternative ways of thinking about, and being in, the world. Their rebellion found a home within the animal rights movement. The older activists tended to emphasize more of a mid-life assessment or, as Shana put it, "where you've been, what you've done, and where you can go from that point." Bonnie, for instance, had achieved great financial and career success but found it ultimately unsatisfying. The women's narratives included a search for something "more meaningful" in their lives. Working on behalf of animals filled this void. The animal rights movement offered a fulfilling way for women to effect change in the world, both personally and as part of a political community. Their interpretation of activism as pleasurable and rewarding is likely a key component to

understanding how such activists sustain their commitment to such a cause—particularly given the struggles they endured as a result of their participation in the movement. They struggled as friendships, family relations, and careers suffered; some experienced harassment and abuse as a result of their activism. Yet, ultimately, they were just as likely to highlight the rewards they gained from their participation in the cause of animal liberation. The most prominent of these rewards was the satisfaction obtained from making a contribution to the world and living a more meaningful life.

Notes

1. Gaard (2001) suggests that it is not necessarily the place of non-native eco-feminists to challenge what they view as oppressive features of marginalized cultures. They are better positioned to confront the oppressive philosophies and practices of their own culture, government, and corporations. A cross-cultural ecofeminist ethic “would consider both the context and content of the ethical question, and seek an inclusive forum for cross-cultural ethical dialogue...” (p. 18).

2. Animal rights activists are often accused by their opponents of being overly emotional and anti-intellectual, and these accusations hold particular meaning with regard to gender and emotional stereotyping (Einwohner, 1999; Groves, 1997). In a 2005 doctoral dissertation, the author included a detailed discussion of how the women activists responded to these gendered perceptions.

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