

Where the Boys Aren't: The Predominance of Women in Animal Rights Activism

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A striking characteristic of the animal rights movement is that women constitute the majority of its activists. This qualitative study of twenty-seven women animal rights activists analyzes how they make sense of their centrality in the movement. The article discusses how cultural discourses regarding sex and gender shape the way women activists interpret their own activism, and the predominance of women in the movement. Their accounts often seek to explain the absence of men more than the presence of women. Women activists explain their large presence in animal rights through biological influences, social learning, and empathy based on common oppressions. As they considered the connection between gender and animal rights activism, women alternatively accepted, rejected, and reformulated dominant ideas about sex and gender. Their complex accounts of the relationship between gender and animal activism highlight the inherently political nature of their choice to become activists.

Keywords: activism / animal rights movement / gender / politics / social movements / women

“Putting yourself out there as an animal rights activist opens you up to a lot of stereotypes and resistance from society. I think a lot of men are hesitant to get involved because they might be looked at as a bleeding heart, openly emotional . . . a little bit too sensitive.”

—Abby, *animal rights activist and participant in this study*

One of the most striking characteristics of the animal rights movement is that the majority of its activists are women. They have been at the forefront of animal rights activism in the United States and Great Britain since the 1800s, and current studies show that women constitute 68–80 percent of the animal rights movement (Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Lowe and Ginsberg 2002). The “Animals’ Agenda” report of two 1985 surveys concluded that “at all levels of participation . . . women constitute the single most important driving force behind the animal rights phenomenon” (Greenville and Moss 1985, 10). Regardless of age, political views, or educational level, women are more likely than men to be animal advocates (Kruse 1999). In general, women are more likely than men to support animal rights (Peek, Bell, and Dunham 1996) and to express concern about the treatment of animals (Driscoll 1992).

This legacy begs the question: How do we explain the connection between gender and animal rights participation? I address a specific angle of this inquiry through a qualitative study of twenty-seven women who are animal rights activists. My focus is on how such activists make sense of their majority status in the movement—in other words, what connections they make between gender and participation in animal rights activism.¹

Scholarship focused on contemporary women’s animal advocacy is scarce. A handful of works (Buettinger 1997; Elston 1987; Ferguson 1998; Lansbury 1985) trace the motivations and experiences of women animal rights activists through the late 1800s and early 1900s, but little is found on their contemporary counterparts. This study responds to the call for more gendered analyses of social protest movements (Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000) by exploring women’s “accounts” of why they make up such a large percentage of animal rights activists.

The concept of accounts was first developed by Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968); early works in this tradition focused on verbal statements made by people to explain deviant behaviors or problematic occurrences. This article follows the path of more recent scholarship, using a broader view of “accounts-as-stories to encompass both private and public explanations for a wider array of social actions” (Orbuch 1997, 474). I emphasize the process by which individuals create accounts (Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber 1990), and the importance of cultural discourse in understanding the accounts individuals present (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). Social movement scholars have used accounts as a means of interpreting activists’ motives for joining movements and the ways they justify certain tactics or behaviors. Justin Goodman (2007), for example, considers the accounts that radical animal rights activists employ to rationalize confrontational direct action.

In this article, I analyze how women animal rights activists use, revise, or reject cultural discourses of sex and gender to develop accounts of both their own activism and the predominance of women in the movement. The activists in this study sometimes used popular biological or social discourses concerning

sex and gender, such as “women are just naturally nurturing” or “women are taught to care,” to make sense of women’s participation in animal rights activism. Yet, they also developed accounts that highlight gender inequity as a motivating factor; such accounts connected the oppression of animals to the oppression of women. By labeling them “accounts,” I wish to emphasize that women’s explanations do not establish a tidy truth about why they are activists; rather, they illustrate how women use discourses of sex and gender to make sense of their political agency.

Gender and Participation in Animal Rights

While the topic of women and the animal rights movement is largely unexplored terrain, there are a handful of works that posit theories about the relevance of gender to participation in animal rights. My review of this literature begins with the theory of “gendered economic structures,” which proposes that women have more free time to devote to social causes and volunteering. James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin (1992) suggest that “[d]espite their increasing participation in the workplace, women are still less likely to be employed full time than men, providing women more time for animal activism” (39).

Other scholars suggest quite the opposite: Namely, that women actually enjoy less free time than men, especially as they bear dual burdens as both family providers and caregivers (Fraser 1994). As increasing numbers of women seek paid employment (with little reduction in housework and child care), the idea that women have more time for animal rights activism is questionable. For example, only one woman in this study did animal rights work while being financially supported by a partner. Furthermore, if time and flexibility explain women’s participation in activism, why do they not dominate *all* social movements?

The socialization aspects of gendered economic structures are perhaps the more enduring parts of this theory. Women are still more likely to be the primary caretakers of animals within households, which might increase their bond with animals; they are also the likely candidates to bring their animals to veterinary clinics, where donation cans or literature about animal welfare groups may be displayed (Kruse 1999). Women also make up the majority of volunteers at animal shelters and rescue groups—all likely places for exposure to animal rights literature or ideas. Thus, women may be the target of animal rights mobilization efforts more than men—a result of what Kruse calls “greater embeddedness in recruitment networks” (195).

Other social learning explanations suggest that gender-role socialization influences emotional response. Masculinity is associated with strength and emotional distance, and showing compassion for animals can be viewed as a sign of weakness. Men may be less willing to pursue animal activism for fear of being associated with a movement stereotyped as being “overly emotional”

and comprised of “bleeding hearts.” Kruse writes that “[m]en may therefore view activism on behalf of animals as *unmasculine* and be unwilling to incur the potentially greater social costs of mobilization” (ibid.).

Women’s high level of involvement in animal issues “reflects the persistence of traditional gender expectations: women are supposed to be sensitive to the feelings of others; and they are asked to be gentle rather than aggressive” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992, 39). The pioneering work of Carol Gilligan (1982) concluded that socialization experiences create distinct ethical frameworks for men and women.² While Gilligan stressed early object relations, other scholars emphasize ongoing gender socialization within institutions like the workplace and media (Kimmel 2008). Girls and women are often taught that emotional expression and compassion are desirable feminine traits, and their concern for the plight of others is thus accepted (even expected) behavior.

Sara Ruddick’s (1989) theory of “maternal thinking” argues that women’s disproportionate role in childrearing makes them more adverse to violence than men, and more active in peace movements. Jasper and Jane Poulsen (1995) extend this logic to animal rights due to the symbolic similarities between children and animals. They speculate that a woman’s likely role as the primary caregiver makes them more amenable to the message of animal rights, “opening them to appeals portraying animals as innocent victims in need of protection” (506). The theory of maternal thinking has been critiqued for its essentialist assumptions, as it “distorts the meaning of politics and political action largely by reinforcing a one-dimensional view of women as creatures of the family” (Dietz 1985, 20).

Ecofeminists have proposed that relational thinking (for example, Gilligan 1982) and experiences of hierarchical domination may cause women to feel more connected to nature and animals (see Adams 1996; Donovan 1990, 2006). They may be less likely to see nature or animals as things to be conquered, controlled, or killed. Kruse (1999) found that greater support for animal rights among women was linked to the fact that they were less likely to hold views that emphasize controlling nature.

Carol Adams’s 1990 pioneering work, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, argues that meat eating in industrialized countries flourishes within a belief system in which animals and women are reduced as objects to be consumed. She analyzes why many rape victims report “being treated like an animal” or “feeling like a piece of meat,” writing: “Just as the slaughterhouse treats animals and its workers as inert, unthinking, unfeeling objects, so too in rape are women treated as inert objects. . . . To feel like a piece of meat is to be treated like an inert object when one is (or was) in fact a living, feeling being” (54). Adams also highlights the connections between violence against women and animals, as a common form of domestic violence is the abuse or murder of a family pet (Flynn 2000).

Women may have a special stake in ending the domination of animal life because of these oppressive connections. Charles Peek, Nancy Bell, and

Charlotte Dunham (1996) suggest that women's experiences with structural oppression make them more inclined to support an "egalitarian ideology" that extends moral concern and fairness to animals. As Josephine Donovan (2006) argues: "Feminists—indeed most women—are acutely aware of what it feels like to have one's opinion ignored, trivialized, rendered unimportant. Perhaps this experience has awakened their sensitivity to the fact that other marginalized groups—including animals—have trouble getting their viewpoints heard" (306).

I have more specifically named this explanation for women's higher levels of animal advocacy as "empathy based on shared inequities": The idea that women identify with the oppression of animals based on similar experiences of objectification, subordination, and abuse. English women in the antivivisection movement of the 1900s drew similarities between invasive gynecological procedures and "research" performed on women and the torture experienced by animals in laboratories.³ Feminist Francis Cobbe organized women in the fight against vivisection by linking it to the institutionalized abuse of women (Ferguson 1998). Medical research on animals was likened to experimental procedures performed on women and the poor, and the antivivisection movement became increasingly associated with the interests of women and the working class.

Carol Lansbury's (1985) historical look at Great Britain's early animal advocacy found that middle-class women and the working class made curious allies in the cause of antivivisection, as both groups were routinely subjected to humiliating and dangerous procedures. She notes that "[e]very flogged and beaten horse, every dog or cat strapped down for the vivisection's knife, reminded them of their own condition in society" (82). Lansbury concludes that women were the most fervent protestors, because "the vivisected animal stood for vivisected woman," but also for the woman "strapped and bound in the pornographic fiction of the period" (*ibid.*).

Some ecofeminists claim that women are naturally more connected to the earth and animals because of their ability to give birth. Two early ecofeminist anthologies, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Plant 1989) and *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (Diamond and Orenstein 1990), focus on these themes, and both are widely read and cited works. Some of these cultural-spiritual feminists argue that there are essential connections embedded in women's bodies that make their relationship to the natural world unique. Ecological feminists such as Chris Cuomo (1998) and Lori Gruen (1993) reject the notion that women have a "special" or "natural" connection to nature or animals, instead emphasizing that the connections between them are only significant as they reflect patterns of hierarchy and domination.

Other biological accounts stress "essential" differences between men and women to explain women's greater consideration for the treatment and status of animals. Sociobiologists argue that the root of this concern can be traced back to different evolutionary pressures among men and women: Namely, that men may be attracted to hunting because of their need to provide for the family

and show masculine prowess, and women may be attached to animals due to maternal instincts (Burghardt and Herzog 1989). Critics say that sociobiology (and the related field of evolutionary psychology) promotes gender inequality as inevitable; furthermore, its claims do not hold up under scientific testing (Fausto-Sterling 1987; Kimmel 2008).

My study offers insight into the theories suggested by the existing literature, and expands the discussion to highlight how cultural discourses frame women activists' explanations of their centrality in the animal rights movement. Importantly, their accounts of gender and animal rights activism often seek to explain the *absence* of men, more than they do the *presence* of women. I connect this to a concern voiced by many animal rights activists, that a movement made up predominantly of women lacks legitimacy in a society based on male dominance. This belief is lent credence by the gendered nature of resistance to animal rights; namely, the movement is portrayed as irrational.

Image Problems: The Absence of Men, the Predominance of Women

Animal rights activists are often accused by their opponents of being overly emotional and anti-intellectual. These accusations hold particular meaning with regard to gender. Rachel Einwohner's (1999) study of two animal rights campaigns (anti-circus and anti-hunting) found that gender and class shaped the ways in which people (in particular, campaign targets) reacted to protest activity, and to the protestors themselves.

In both campaigns, the targeted audience viewed the activists as emotional or sentimental people. In the context of the circus, which is associated with family outings and children, the fact that activists were seen as caring and compassionate did not necessarily diminish the effectiveness of the protest. However, the hunters "drew a distinction between themselves ('scientific practitioners') and their adversaries ('sentimental fluffheads') when assessing the activists' arguments against hunting" (67). Hunters did not dismiss the protestors and their causes "simply because the activists are non-working-class women." Einwohner offers a more complicated analysis of the social dynamic: "Rather, it is the set of meanings that hunters associate with the activists—overly emotional women attempting to voice an opinion on an issue that they do not understand—that delegitimizes the activists' arguments" (67–68).

Studies of the animal rights movement find that activists are well-aware of these emotional stereotypes (Groves 1995; Herzog 1993) and take measures to counter them. They often avoid emotional appeals in favor of what they consider to be rationally based arguments.⁴ Within Julian Groves's (1995) sample of activists, it was widely believed that women (particularly homemakers) were more emotional than men. Groves writes that "[g]iven their concern not to be construed as overly emotional, a few activists recalled being disappointed at finding that the members in their local animal rights chapter were mostly

women” (454). These activists commonly believe that incorporating more men into their organization could be a strategic device to bring “credibility” to the animal rights movement. It is not surprising to find that the women in this study spent a great deal of time explaining men’s low levels of participation in the movement; many developed accounts to justify men’s absence, being well aware that society demanded such an explanation.

Gender Divisions in Leadership and Labor

Gender-role divisions within the movement are another important cultural backdrop that informs our understanding of women’s participation in animal rights. The majority of the movement’s leaders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were men, although women have always served as the backbone of the movement. Contemporary studies of the movement still suggest that women are “overrepresented among rank-and-file members, yet underrepresented in leadership positions” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992, 59). My own study suggests progress toward greater equity in leadership positions; eleven of the twenty-seven women I interviewed had either started an animal organization or currently directed one. Yet, women activists still express concern that the animal rights movement features men as its most visible leaders, while the surrounding staff and membership (mostly women) provide direct care to animals and keep the day-to-day operations of a group functioning (for example, by letter-writing, photocopying, tabling, and so on).

Other contemporary debates about the role of women in animal rights involve the sexualized media tactics of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), such as the famous “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” advertisements featuring nude or semi-nude female celebrities. Other campaigns have featured scantily clad women in cages to protest animals in captivity and former Playboy models with half-open shirts urging consumers “I Want You to Go Vegetarian.” PETA’s shock campaigns have generated heated debate among animal rights activists, especially those who identify as feminist (Adams 2003; Herzog, Dinoff, and Page 1997).

My exploration of women activists’ views on the PETA sexual campaigns (Gaarder 2007) found that women were deeply divided over the ethics and efficacy of such tactics. The women activists who supported the campaigns believed that they were a good way to raise awareness about animal issues in a male-dominated society where “sex sells”; they argued that the women who chose to participate in the campaigns did so of their own free will and therefore were not being exploited. Most importantly, these activists emphasized doing “whatever was best” for the animals—their was the “ultimate” oppression and must be prioritized over “human concerns.”

Women activists who opposed the campaigns argued that they were demeaning to women and perpetuated sexism in the culture. They saw the

tactics as largely ineffective and inconsistent with fighting objectification and oppression on all levels. The use of such tactics made them feel personally unwelcome or disrespected as women activists. They believed that PETA's shock campaigns undermined women's position as intelligent and thoughtful actors in the animal rights movement. Such debate illustrates the gendered complexities involving the animal rights movement as a whole.

Research Design and Methods

The study was conducted using in-depth interviews with twenty-seven female animal rights activists, as well as participant observation of various aspects of the movement, such as organizations, protests, and conferences. I chose to only interview women, as I wanted to understand how they made sense of the "gender question" in animal activism and also to investigate women's experiences in social movements more generally. While a comparative study of the pathways and experiences of male and female animal rights activists is an important topic for future study, women activists are the focal point of this research.

I conducted the interviews over a period of two years (July 2002–July 2004), using purposive and snowball sampling to locate interviewees. Some of my initial contacts were women I had met in animal activist groups; in turn, they gave me contact information for other women activists. I also consulted a prisoner's list posted on an animal rights Web site, subsequently writing to the only woman listed who resided in the United States. Finally, I conducted fourteen of the interviews at the 2003 Animal Rights National Conference in Los Angeles, where I randomly approached women at information tables, panels, and during community meals.⁵

Demographic Characteristics

I interviewed women from varying backgrounds, age groups, and areas of the country. The participants had been involved with animal rights from one to sixty-two years, with an average of nine years. The most common characteristic of the women was their race or ethnicity: Like the majority of animal rights activists, the women were mostly white (Jamison 1998). Twenty-two identified as white, with three further specifying a Jewish background; the five women of color were Latina, Asian American, African American, and multiracial (East Indian and white; white and Native American). I interviewed activists ranging in age from 17 to 90. Nine of the activists were married or with a long-term partner; the remaining eighteen women were single (one was widowed, and two were divorced). Only three of the women had children, and twenty-two of them lived with at least one animal in their household.

The women's educational levels were consistent with that of other animal rights activists, who, comparatively speaking, have much higher levels of education than the population as a whole (Jamison 1998; Jasper and Poulsen 1995;

Lowe and Ginsberg 2002). The majority had some college experience, and six had postgraduate degrees. Some were comfortably middle class, some were lower middle class, and a few struggled financially. Survey data report that the majority of animal rights participants generally are middle class (Jamison 1998; Lowe and Ginsberg 2002). The animal rights movement has been characterized as a “post-citizenship movement,” because it is largely composed of people who are well integrated into the structures of society. “Because they need not demand basic rights for themselves, post-citizenship movement members pursue protections or benefits for others,” write Jasper and Nelkin (1992, 7). The predominantly white middle-class makeup of the movement suggests that its participants have the time, money, and political security to devote emotional and material resources to animal rights, yet the high rate of female membership within the animal rights movement defies any simple characterization of the integration of its activists into the power structures of society. As many of the women activists themselves noted, gender deeply undermines economic, cultural, and political power.

Findings

In this study, I directly asked women to develop “accounts” of gender and animal rights activism; more specifically, I asked them to tell me why they believed that so many women were drawn to the movement. I also considered the women’s own stories of how and why they became animal rights activists. Their personal journeys provide insight into how they formed their larger accounts regarding gender and animal activism. Thus, I focus both on the women’s macro-level accounts or “talk” about the relationship between gender and animal activism, as well as personal narratives of their pathways to activism.

Shared Inequities:

Comparing the Status of Animals to the Status of Women

Twelve of the activists believed that women were more likely to identify with the oppressed status of animals because of their own experiences of oppression. These accounts identified links between the statuses of women and animals in society in many ways: Experiences of physical and sexual violence; lack of voice or political power; being neglected or ignored; being controlled; and being viewed as objects or property.

Four of the women made direct connections between animal abuse and the violence they had experienced in their own lives. Katie was a high school student who painfully related to the violence suffered by animals: “When I see people eating animals or their ‘products,’ sometimes I don’t feel anything but alienated. Other times I want to cry and I get a similar feeling to when I think about when I was raped and assaulted.” At age 17, she was serving a jail sentence for an act of civil disobedience against animal experimentation. In a

letter she wrote to me while in jail, Katie referred to Mary Pipher's (1994) book on adolescent girls, *Reviving Ophelia*, to explain the connection between her personal experience and political awakening. Pipher suggests that one reason why many girls become vegetarian during adolescence is because they recognize the powerlessness of many animals. Katie wrote that "[g]irls suddenly know what it is like to feel voiceless and helpless—under the thumb of a ruling sex/class/age, and they sympathize with their animal kin. They feel the need to help those who are oppressed. I found that to be true, from my own personal findings and feelings."

Joanne spoke of an experience she believed women share with animals: Their treatment by the medical industry. While not seeking to directly compare animal experiences (for example, torture or deadly laboratory tests) to her own, Joanne nevertheless was critical of the treatment she had received from medical doctors. Doctors were more likely to tell women "it's all in your head" and treat them with disdain: "I've had doctors be really rude to me in general. . . . You're sitting down, they're standing up, and they look at you a certain way—like you don't know anything." Joanne's description highlighted the dominating figure of the medical doctor (he is standing *over* her), which bears resemblance to the complaints and comparisons of her nineteenth-century female counterparts in the fight against vivisection. Many of the women in this study expressed skepticism of the modern model of Western medicine, most obviously on behalf of animals (for example, pharmaceutical testing), but also for themselves. Some were particularly critical of what they called the "patriarchal values" governing the Western model of science.

Another recurring theme in women's descriptions of animals in society, and sometimes their own experiences as women, was lack of voice. Diane empathized with animals' lack of voice and power among humans; it helped her articulate her own struggles, and she positioned animals as her allies. She believed that women identified with animals and their plight because both are "secondary" beings in society. Diane offered a personal example as illustration:

How many animals really have a voice? When you get in a group of men, it's a struggle, you know, to be heard. I only developed my voice less than ten years ago, and that was from extensive therapy and I was involved with a women's support group. It was really only there that I began to address some of my core issues and one of them is . . . very little self-confidence. What I had to say wasn't important, that kind of thing. When I go back to my family, who are the outspoken ones? Men, generally. They get heard first.

Zoey also felt unheard and powerless while growing up, especially within her family. She related to animals because "animals are always kind of ignored and people don't pay much attention to them or really care what they're thinking and that's how I felt when I was growing up. My parents didn't really care much about what I had to say, or at least they didn't act like they did." She drew further

parallels between the condition of animals and her experiences growing up as a young woman in society: “I don’t think it’s so natural for animals to want to please people as much as they do now, the way they’re bred and the ways they depend on the people who cage them. And that’s what I’m going through now, because I feel like I do that a lot around men sometimes. . . . It’s like I’m not even listening to what I want.”

Zoey also discussed the emphasis placed on physical appearance. People often choose animal companions based on whether they are “cute and fluffy,” and she compared this to the pressure she felt “to look cute and pretty.” She explained: “There is that parallel between animals—you have to look a certain way so that they’ll like you. And act a certain way—animals have to be good. They’re not allowed to bite!” Zoey was able to explore her own personal battles with lack of voice and power through her involvement in the animal rights movement. Working on campaigns and reading ecofeminist literature (particularly the works of Carol Adams) deepened her understanding of her own life struggles and the interconnections between various types of oppression. She reflected that “[i]n our culture, people pay less attention and respect to animals, children, women, and people of color, et cetera, and I see it all as part of the struggle.”

Marianna recognized her gendered and raced struggles with voice and power as parallel to the situation of animals. As a Mexican American woman, she faced multiple struggles with voice—both in a dominant white society and within her own family. She noted a lack of Latina role models for the animal work she felt called to, and craved to hear more from people of color in the movement. At the same time, Marianna’s words and opinions were disregarded by the men in her family, a condition she likened to an animal’s powerlessness:

Your word is not honored as legitimate, not like men’s words are. Women are considered little—they’re talked about that way. Their words are sort of considered childish. In my family it’s like that. No matter what I say, my words never will match up to fit a room with all my male relatives. They’ll always make degrading remarks like, “Oh you’re just crazy—crazy like your grandma.” So what I do is I go into the kitchen with the women and I talk, because that’s where your word actually matters. You’re listened to. Your words mean something. This is in my family, but it’s everywhere too. So these animals—it doesn’t matter what they want, it’s just the same way. I feel that women do recognize that and that holds true for women in this movement.

Marianna’s words create a compelling account of shared inequities. First, she notes that women’s voices are considered “little” and childlike. The things they have to say are deemed unimportant. When Marianna attempts to join a conversation with her male relatives, she is accused of being “crazy” (for example, irrational, overemotional). The only place where her word “actually matters” is among those who are similarly devalued—the women in her family. And where

do women hold conversation? In the domestic realm of the kitchen. She ends her account by comparing women's situation to that of animals—degraded and disregarded. She surmises that women relate to the oppression of animals.

Marianna found comfort and camaraderie among her female relatives, and it was here that she was able to articulate her ideas. Diane had similar experiences among the men in her family and only began to develop her voice within a women's support group. It is not surprising that so many women in the study considered animals part of their "support network"; animals were trustworthy companions, because they also experienced a lack of power and voice in this world.

Gender Socialization: Tough Men and Caring Women

Twelve of the twenty-seven women in this study theorized that gender socialization helped explain gender participation in animal activism. Women who spoke of social learning theories often drew a deliberate distinction between the social and the biological. These accounts involved talk about how girls and women are encouraged to develop emotional capacities—they "learn to care." Many of the accounts of gender socialization were more about men than women. They often responded to the question of why women were more likely to be animal rights activists by explaining why men were *less* likely to be involved.

Erin related the absence of men to meat eating and masculinity: "I think men suffer a lot more societal pressure to not be vegetarian. There are masculinity issues with being vegetarian. It's not manly to say, 'Can I have a veggie burger?'" Erin also framed the idea of controlling one's food intake as a gendered issue. One reason she believed women comprised more of the animal rights movement was because "it's okay for us to control our food. . . . It is more socially acceptable for women to say no to food." She went on to explain: "Women aren't supposed to be eating that much anyway. So your defenses can go down, because it's socially acceptable to be vegetarian. That defense isn't down for men, because it's not okay for them to eat salad."

The extreme pressure put on women to be thin makes it acceptable, even desirable, for them to eliminate animal foods. In contrast, men are pressured to "eat manly"—meaning foods that are associated with being strong, substantial, and hearty (Franklin 1999). Adams's work (1990, 2003) documents these themes in the media and popular culture. She offers an example in the remark of a food writer for *GQ* magazine in the mid-1990s concerning the appropriate masculine diet: "Boy food doesn't grow. It is hunted or killed" (2003, 92). Adams further notes that animal foods are often marketed to men as metaphors of women's body parts (for example, "Double D Cup Breast of Turkey" or "Tasty Chicks"). The language and images in popular culture lend support to Erin's socialization theories regarding gendered food intake.

Marianna made it clear that both men and women had nurturing qualities, but that it was more acceptable for women to express them: "I've met men who

are more emotional and compassionate than I ever could be, but the fact is that in general . . . women are less afraid [to express it]." She concluded: "That's why women are more in the movement. Any sensitive issues that could provoke serious emotions, that's just a woman-dominated field in a patriarchal society."

Abby described interactions with men who expressed interest in, or believed in, animal rights, but were hesitant to become involved on a public level. She said that their identity as men might be questioned if they become involved in work that revealed a more "sensitive side." When Abby participated in protests, she was often accused of being overly sensitive and irrational, and she surmised that men would be particularly bothered by such labels.

Biological Influences: Testosterone versus Motherly Instincts

Ten women discussed biological explanations for women's greater involvement in animal rights. One noticeable trait these women shared was their age—most were over age 30. Women younger than this were more likely to hold sturdy and detailed opinions about sociological explanations and shared inequities, perhaps because younger women may have had a better chance for cultural exposure to social learning theories about gender, versus the "biological destiny" arguments that their older counterparts may have encountered while growing up.

I also found that the younger women in the sample were more likely to be involved in a variety of progressive social and activist networks. This may also help explain why they were so conversant in sociological theories of gender and feminist frameworks regarding the connections between oppression. This highlights how culture helped shape how women used social or biological accounts to explain their activism. The younger women tended to reject biological destiny accounts, probably because they had been exposed to alternative cultural views during their formative years (for example, within family, educational, or activist structures). Some of the younger women had also been radicalized toward a feminist framing of the oppression of animals by their participation in the animal rights movement, where they read books and attended talks given by author/activists like Adams.

Two main themes were present within the biological accounts: The presence of testosterone in men, and nurturing instincts in women. Like the accounts of gender socialization, the biological accounts often explained the behavior (or biology) of men to answer the question of why more women were involved in the animal rights movement. Frances said that "[w]omen by nature are more sensitive than men are, especially to the suffering of others. They tend to want to nurture and care for those who are defenseless. They don't have as much testosterone." Yet, Frances also said that men's limited involvement with animal rights came from parents raising boys to be "tough" within her generation (she was 63 years old)—an idea grounded in social learning.

Cassandra drew biological distinctions, with women being the more "empathetic" gender, and men as "not natural nurturers." She hypothesized that when

women “see and experience another creature’s suffering, [they] feel driven to act.” She surmised that it was easier for men to “distance themselves from the suffering of other creatures and rationalize why it must be so” because of their hormonal and physical makeup. More specifically, she discussed testosterone and popular accounts of ancient human history:

In our evolution, at one point in time, it was important for one of the genders to go out in the world and face danger. One of those things they faced was wild animals. They had to be able to kill them for your own food survival. . . . We no longer have to do that, but the testosterone level is still there. So we still have guys who have more testosterone than is useful and it interferes with their ability to empathize and it also drives them to do things like hunt and kill. It’s going to have to be reduced. But in the meanwhile, you’re looking at the results of testosterone poisoning!

Cassandra delivered her theory with a great deal of humor, but to some extent she believed that essential differences between men and women help explain why so many women were drawn to animal activism. The story of her own path to animal activism was attributed not to “natural nurturing,” but personal experience—the fact that she herself had been abused as a child (and watched animals be abused). It is not hard to understand why Cassandra believed women might be more naturally drawn to the suffering of animals, because that was her experience as an abuse survivor: “I have parts of me that really want to make up to the animal population in general.” Her animal activism came into focus as personal catharsis, but also as a larger political awakening about peace and justice issues. Like many women in this study, Cassandra began reading to educate herself on political issues; her choice to participate in activist causes followed. Cassandra may have been initially drawn to animal causes because of her background, but the fact that she sought information on such issues was also a political choice.

When asked why women made up the majority of the movement, Anika immediately replied, “Women are much more compassionate than men in general.” She then stopped herself: “I don’t like to go to that nurturing thing. I hate that I go there right away. I mean, *I’m* not really that nurturing.” Anika was disappointed by her reliance on a biological stereotype.

Other women were more definitive regarding their biological theories of women, men, and animal activism. Like several other women, Ricki saw testosterone and genetics as an impediment to men’s compassion for animals: “A lot of men are . . . just genetically programmed to go to war and kill each other and kill animals and pound and stomp and smash. That’s the testosterone thing they’ve got going!”

Four other women spoke of a specific sort of biological imperative: “Maternal instinct.” Joanne and Yvonne had no children of their own, but they wondered if women were drawn to animal suffering through motherhood

experiences. Yvonne said “[w]e create life, you know, and I can’t imagine a woman reading about a mother cow having her calf ripped away from her two hours after it’s born and not having some kind of connection with that.” Joanne similarly described a mother cow’s predicament in the factory farming industry:

I saw this picture of a cow hooked up to this machine. I was absolutely horrified. The reality of the way these animals are abused and how much the information is hidden. I mean, I don’t even have the words for it. I could not believe that this female cow—she has babies like three times and then they take the babies—their babies! They put them in crates by the neck, and I mean—my breasts were hurting. My body was hurting. . . . Yeah, as a woman—I made that connection.

Joanne’s horror at the cow’s circumstances was based on her empathetic connection as a woman, imagining what it would be like to experience her own babies taken from her. She also considered the coercive reproductive history of female humans and female animals. Joanne described herself as “very motherly” toward her companion animals, explaining that “I have a little cat who I nursed when she was an hour old and I’m so protective of her.” She considered herself to be the cat’s mother, rescuer, and protector. When she thought about cats being experimented on in laboratories, she immediately thought of her own. It made sense to Joanne that women comprised so much of the movement, “because women feel more from their hearts than from their heads, although that’s definitely not always the case.” Yet, her compassion went far beyond her own cat; her relationship to one cat provoked a reaction strong enough to stimulate concern for the widespread abuse of many animals.

As Suzanne Michel (1998) discovered in her study of wildlife rehabilitators, caring was a political act of resistance. She writes that “rehabilitators act upon their empathy with animals through a politics of care that entails first caring for and then releasing injured animals,” and second, by educating others through environmental outreach programs as a means to spread their “notions of kinship with and their ethic of care for all species” (176). Similarly, Cuomo and Gruen (1998) write that “positive, consciously intimate attachments with animals ought to be taken seriously as relationships with radical political implications” (137). As Joanne described it, her “heart” had a great deal to do with why she was an animal activist, though her caring heart led her to act in ways that were as political as they were personal.

Women as Political Actors

In a previous work (Gaarder 2008), I reported on women animal activists’ pride in their ability to make a difference in the lives of animals. Women developed greater self-confidence, leadership abilities, and political skills. Their accounts of activism revealed a common thread: A marked change of consciousness about the world and one’s place within it. Younger activists spoke of feeling

alienated by mainstream cultural or religious values; thus the animal rights movement was a place to explore alternative ways of thinking about and being in the world. Marie explained that as a teenager, she began to resist what she called her “extremely conservative Mormon family.” She read Peter Singer and became a vegetarian, saying “[i]t was sort of a rebellious thing as well. Like, ha ha, fuck Mormonism! And also, I’m a vegetarian, and a lesbian! Fuck you guys! There was a little bit of that in it. Then it became somewhat more cemented when you investigate the ideas behind your rebellious tendencies.”

The older activists tended to emphasize the importance of a “turning point” toward activism in mid-life. At age 45, Shana gave up a successful career as a writer and artist to start her own nonprofit bird sanctuary. Bonnie abandoned an established career to devote herself to animal advocacy. She was “totally entrenched in a corporate, well-paid job” when she started to question the purpose of her life: “I thought, okay, is this what I’m supposed to be doing with my energy for the rest of my life? Making money and doing proposals and traveling everywhere?”

Such accounts emphasized a search for something more meaningful in life, and the difficulty or risk in making the choice to become full-time activists. Irene, age 90, encountered considerable resistance in her pathway to activism, including from her male counterparts in the movement. As a young activist during the 1940s she started an animal advocacy group with another woman. When they became affiliated with the American Humane Society she was replaced as its leader, “because they didn’t want women running things.” Irene persisted with her activism in spite of patriarchal stereotyping. She left the society to form her own group again and continued to resist attempts to belittle her beliefs or work, saying “[w]omen are not sex symbols. One time I was at an animal convention and one of the male officials said, ‘Why don’t you wear high heels?’ Because I was always wearing comfortable, flat sandals. And I said, ‘Listen. Why don’t *you*?’ And can you imagine my getting out of the car and rescuing an animal I see in the desert or someplace all dressed up in high heels?”

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. They had come to view themselves as informed, engaged citizens. When I asked women to describe their pathways to activism, they provided detailed accounts of what influenced their political engagement or the “moment” when they decided to devote themselves to the cause. While they often referred to personal experiences that influenced them, they also emphasized the importance of choosing to become activists. My asking “Why do you think women are the majority of animal activists?” prompted many of the accounts of sex and gender. When asked about the category of women, their responses tended to reflect the current gender theories at our disposal. While some discussed the relevance of gender in their personal pathway to activism, my direct solicitation about the relevance

of gender to animal advocacy was far more likely to produce such accounts. In this way, I may have contributed to the cultural discourse on sex and gender that influenced the women activists.

Conclusions

This study offers insight into the question of how gender impacts participation in animal rights activism, but more specifically, it exposes the power of cultural discourse in shaping accounts of gender and social activism. The animal rights movement is stereotyped as being overly emotional, an evaluation certainly linked to the centrality of women in it. Many of the women activists relied on social and biological discourses to explain the lack of men in the movement, with such accounts serving to justify men's absence rather than condemning it. They suggested that animal activism held greater social risk for men, or that men were not biologically predisposed to care about animals. In some ways, their explanations or excuses for men downplayed the powerful and political meanings of their own choices to become animal activists.

Women also used social or biological discourses to explain their own activism. Their macro-accounts and personal narratives reflect the complex contours that sex and gender hold for women activists. In social learning accounts, they said that women were more socialized to care about suffering, that animal work is more socially acceptable for women, because advocating for the vulnerable is considered "emotion work." Yet, women activists also made sense of their predominance in the movement with biological accounts, interpreting women's involvement with animal causes as instinctual and "natural." Perhaps some elements within the animal rights movement itself (for example, PETA's shock campaigns) contribute to a rather narrow view of women's participation in animal rights, by relegating women to traditionally feminine roles.

These biological accounts certainly reflect the widespread beliefs regarding sex and gender held across many cultures: Primarily, that biology predetermines a human being's nature, preferences, and/or skills. Biological determinism includes various arguments, from physical or hormonal differences to differing evolutionary pressures. All suggest that sex differences determine certain behaviors and roles in society. For example, the fact that some women have the reproductive capacity to become mothers has led to a popular perception that women are natural caretakers of the earth and its creatures. Ten of the activists in this study assimilated this belief to at least some extent. I remain curious as to whether these accounts functioned as a buffer against critiques of animal activism; perhaps relying on biological explanations that preclude choice offers safe ground from which to defend one's participation in animal activism, especially given that all of the women in this study encountered resistance to their beliefs and actions, whether from family, friends, colleagues, or the general public. Yet, the resistance that women activists encounter also plays a part in creating a

sense of oneself as a political actor, as the women began to view themselves as taking an often unpopular advocacy stance.

Other activists suggested that if some women do have an “instinctual” response to animal exploitation or abuse, it may be an *empathetic* reaction rather than a biological one. This might be true for anyone who has experienced systematic oppression, for a person who sees the suffering of animals may recall his or her own experiences of violence or oppression. This is not because caring is a biological calling based on hormones, but rather that oppression can stimulate feelings of compassion and understanding among those who have experienced similar situations. The feelings or motivations of women activists that appear to be biological “instincts” or nurturing “natures” may actually represent specific life experiences. This “account-making” represents one of the most important ways that women activists reformulated cultural discourses on sex and gender.

Ecofeminism’s claim that women experience empathy toward animals and nature based on shared inequities was echoed by almost half of the women. They identified links to the status of women and animals in society in symbolic ways, as well as through personal experiences that they considered to be similar to the experiences of animals. They engaged in theory-making about how experiences of injustice can stimulate empathy and action on behalf of others. These accounts highlighted gender inequity as a motivating factor in women’s animal rights activism; they also functioned as a means of empowerment, as women connected their experiences of oppression to increased political awareness and action—both for themselves and for animals.

The fact that women dominate the animal rights movement need not be equated with the idea that women *naturally* feel a greater affinity or compassion for animals. This distortion suggests that women activists are simply following a biological calling, when, in fact, they make a conscious *choice* to become political activists. Biological typecasting has also been used to explain away the political choices of women who resist militarism and war (hooks 1989). Common stereotypes suggest that women naturally oppose war because they are the bearers of children, and women’s relationship with nature and animals has been similarly read. However, women “are not inherently more life-affirming or non-violent” (94); as bell hooks points out, a significant number of women support the industry and ideology of war. If women are naturally opposed to violence, war, or the oppression of animals, what is the big deal about women’s activism? After all, this is just what women are inclined to do. Yet, many women are not inclined to do this and participate in violence against animals through their purchase and consumption of the bodies of animals for entertainment, medicine, fashion, or food.

I compare arguments about women’s natural inclinations to the activist account of Jacqueline, an African American lawyer who worked with low-income battered women, many of them women of color. Jacqueline remembered when she began to “learn more about what they call the link between animal

abuse and violence against humans.” It motivated her to investigate how to use her legal skills on behalf of abused animals:

Then in the process, as I began to get more involved and learn more about animal rights and what actually happens to animals in zoos and circuses and factory farms and all that, I began to say, okay, well, I’m a vegetarian. But what about being vegan? And then what about the clothes I wear? As I learned more, I began to see a lot more ways in which animals were abused and how I actually contribute to it by the choices I make.

Jacqueline’s account of becoming an animal rights activist reveals the thoughtful personal and political engagement implicit in the choice to become an advocate for animals. To name women’s greater participation in animal rights as biologically driven promotes a simplistic view of women’s thought processes, ethical choices, and political decisions. Such assumptions degrade the power of women’s decisions to advocate for animals. Discussions of animal rights activism that rely on rudimentary notions of sex or gender to explain women’s high participation rates miss the complexity involved in women’s personal and political choices. Such an analysis constructs an incomplete and essentialist notion of the so-called female experience.

This study demonstrates that women in the animal rights movement alternatively use, reject, and reformulate cultural ideas about sex and gender to explain both their own pull toward activism and the prevalence of women in the movement. Their personal narratives and larger theoretical explanations were intricate accounts of the biological, the social, and the power of empathetic action rising from common experiences of oppression. Some adopted normative cultural narratives about sex and gender to answer my query about the predominance of *women* in the movement, but most were inclined to view themselves as political actors within the context of their *individual* pathway to activism. In this way, their accounts of activism transcended the cultural limitations of my own research structure.

When women make the choice to become animal rights activists, they should be considered, in the words of hooks (1989), “political thinkers making political choices” (95). Only within this framework can we begin to understand the social and political relevancy of women’s narratives of activism and the majority status they hold in the movement for animal rights. I hope that such a framework might also inspire women activists to re-imagine the significance of their extraordinary political choices.

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Notes

1. A brief note on my definition of “animal rights activism” is necessary here. Two common terms used to describe activism on behalf of animals are “animal rights” and “animal welfare.” The philosophy of animal rights is generally understood as the idea that animals are “subjects of a life” (Regan 1983) and thus have an intrinsic right to live free from human exploitation. While there are differing views among animal rights (or animal liberation) supporters, the underlying principle is that animals deserve to live according to their own natures; the goal is to eliminate the institutionalized use of animals for human use (for example, for clothing, food, experimentation, and entertainment).

Activists within animal welfare organizations work toward the prevention of cruelty toward animals. The animal welfare movement attempts to reduce animal suffering through humane treatment, but it does not have as a goal the elimination of the use and exploitation of animals. Animal welfare is generally associated with humane societies and other groups that focus on companion animals like dogs and cats. Animal rights activists sometimes differentiate between themselves and animal welfarists by saying that welfarists work for bigger cages, while they work for empty ones. This was a distinction made by very few women in this study, because a good number of them worked on both kinds of issues and within both rights groups and welfare groups; for example, they might participate in protests against rodeos at the same time they were organizing an adoption day for dogs and cats.

Since my focus here was animal rights activists, I only interviewed women who self-described as such or held beliefs and participated in organizations and actions consistent with common definitions of animal rights. I tried in my participant selection to exclude women whose beliefs and activism were clearly welfarist and outside the scope of the animal rights movement, while allowing for multiple interpretations of animal rights positions.

2. Other research finds that situational contexts explain moral reasoning or ethical behavior better than gender (Ryan, David, and Reynolds 2004). For instance, care-based approaches emerge more when interacting with a friend than a stranger and when others are considered “in-group” members.

3. Vivisection is the practice of cutting or operating (experimenting) on living animals.

4. Pioneering works in animal rights are heavy on philosophical reasoning that protests the use of “sentimentality” and champions “rational inquiry” (Regan 1983). Feminists in the animal rights movement have challenged such notions (for example, Adams 1996; Donovan 1990).

5. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to four hours in length, with the average being two hours. I conducted the interviews at my home, the woman’s home, restaurants, coffee shops, and hotel lobbies. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on four areas: 1) pathways to activism; 2) current activist work and lifestyle; 3) beliefs regarding specific animal issues; and 4) issues and controversies within the animal rights movement. This article only addresses the first area: Pathways to activism. I approached this with an open-ended question: “How did you first become aware of animal issues or involved in animal work?” After tracing their individual paths, I asked participants: “Why do you think women are the majority of animal rights activists?” All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

With the exception of two interviews conducted via postal letter and e-mail, all others were in person, tape-recorded, and transcribed by the author. Each transcript was read multiple times as I noted major themes and connecting threads. Upon recognizing the many interpretations of sex and gender used by the activists, I was influenced by Bridget Byrne’s (2003) discussion of how narratives of the self are dependent upon discourses of race, class, and gender. In the resulting analysis, I highlight connections between the women’s life stories and their accounts of women’s participation in animal activism.

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