

Overcoming Sociological Naïveté in the Animal Rights Movement

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The following paper draws upon Milner's theory of social status to explain why nonhuman animals generally are not accorded equal status or the same level of compassion as human beings. The inexpandable nature of status means that one's position in a status hierarchy depends upon how one fares relative to everyone else. Acquiring status requires the ability to excel in terms of collective expectations, or the ability to conform appropriately to extant group norms. Moreover, social associations with high-status individuals usually further enhance one's relative status. Animals are disadvantaged along each of these aspects of status systems in most cases. Moreover, their relational and cultural distance from human beings reinforces their inferior position, reducing the likelihood of human beings defining them as "innocent victims" or otherwise according them full and equal rights. Yet animal rights activists who are aware of these sociological realities will be in a better position to advocate more effectively on behalf of at least selected nonhuman species. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2016 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

On June 27, 2010, Emma Czornobaj stopped her Honda Civic in the left lane of a Quebec highway to assist a group of ducklings, as distracted drivers observed her efforts before returning their gaze to the roadway. André Roy, riding his Harley-Davidson with his 16-year-old daughter Jessie, only noticed the illegally parked vehicle at the last moment and could not swerve in time to avoid crashing into the rear of the Civic. Both Roy and his daughter died as a result. In June 2014, a jury convicted Czornobaj of criminal negligence causing death (Cherry 2014). The Crown Prosecutor, Annie-Claude Chasse, commented: “What we hope is that a clear message is sent to the society that we do not stop on the highway for animals. It’s not worth it” (The Canadian Press 2014).

The tragic incident highlights the inherent tensions embedded in the philosophical debates surrounding the value of human life vis-à-vis nonhuman life. At one end of the continuum, some individuals challenge the legitimacy of speciesism to recognize nonhuman animals as equally deserving of human kindness and compassion. For example, an online reader of The Canadian Press (2014) article suggested that while “she made a mistake in the placement of her stopped vehicle, Emma Czornobaj is a hero, and her intentions were pure. Everyone should stop to protect the innocent.” At the other end of the continuum are those who draw clear distinctions between the value of human and nonhuman life: “Bleeding heart liberals sure do know how to minimize a human life. According to them, animals are just as valuable as humans.” The latter comment affirms Cherry’s (2010: 451) argument that “nonactivists hold a worldview in which humans are superior to animals, a view that shapes their relationships with animals.”

The current paper examines these competing claims from a sociological perspective by applying Milner’s (1994a, 2004) theory of status relations to explain why animal rights activists and those committed to “total liberation” (Pellow and Brehm 2015) face a rather daunting challenge. The main argument highlights the challenges associated with efforts to elevate the status of nonhuman species. The failure to understand these constraints, a classic example of “sociological naïveté,” limits the efficacy of animal rights campaigns. By the same reasoning, a deeper sociological understanding of the theory of status relations can highlight conditions that might advance the cause of animal rights. The article then draws upon both a national opinion survey and a small-scale survey of university students to offer a preliminary test of the

thesis. Although there are clear methodological limits to the data sources, the results from these surveys nevertheless support the main thesis developed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social scientific research on nonhuman animals has grown considerably over the years, with various journals and monographs aimed at advancing research on human-nonhuman interactions (Irvine 2004; Markovits and Queen 2009; Sable 2013; Serpell 2009; Vitulli 2006), the debates concerning animal cruelty, liberation and rights (Abbate 2015; Flükiger 2008; Merz-Perez and Heide 2004; Upton 2012), the cognitive and emotional capacities of nonhuman animals (Burghardt 2009; Custance and Mayer 2012; Singer 2014), and an assortment of other issues (e.g., Balster et al. 2009; Skitka 2012; Strier 2009). A growing body of sociological literature has focused on animal rights as a social movement (Cherry 2010; Lindblom and Jacobsson 2014), including the ritualistic nature of conversion and participation in the movement (Carmona 2012; Pike 2013).

The most significant ideological development in the animal rights movement, however, has been the shift from an “animal welfare” to the “abolitionist” approach. The former stresses the humane treatment of animals, especially the assurances of reasonable protections against cruelty or suffering in the context of the meat industry (Benson and Rollin 2004; Richards et al. 2013; Tauber 2013; Uzea et al. 2001). In contrast, the abolitionist movement promotes the idea that nonhuman animals have a moral status that requires humans to refrain from all forms of inhumane treatment or the infliction of suffering upon them (Greenebaum 2009; Munro 2012). The legal scholar Gary Francione, for instance, has been a key leader of the abolitionist movement through his academic and advocacy work (Francione 1996; Francione and Garner 2010).¹ The struggle to recruit members continues apace, as activists recognize that “the now common belief that (nonhuman) beings have the right to be considered within the moral universe of humans and treated as viable members of human social groups is relatively new and still far from universal” (Young 2013: 298). Studies suggest there has been a perceptible shift over the past two decades in terms of viewing some species as having certain “rights” at least somewhat comparable to that of human beings (Hughes and Lawson 2011; Markovits and Queen 2009; Regan 2001).

Pellow and Brehm (2015) claim that radical environmental and animal liberation groups are engaged in a fundamental frame transformation: the shift toward “total liberation.” Those committed to the total liberation orientation argue that there are multifarious linked oppressions that exist which cannot be understood or effectively challenged independently of each other (Wyckoff 2014; see Dominick 1997). Instead, the total liberation frame acknowledges first and foremost the importance of developing a social justice orientation that emphasizes anti-oppression strategies and practices for humans, nonhuman animals, and the ecosystem. The North American Animal Liberation Press Office’s Jerry Vlasak comments:

We see (animal rights) as a struggle comparable to other liberation struggles: slavery, Algerian resistance, anti-Apartheid, and the resistance to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—all are struggles of oppressed people and nonhumans for freedom. We don’t see a difference. Speciesism is something we don’t endorse, just like we don’t endorse racism or sexism or ageism or homophobia (Pellow and Brehm 2015: 206).

To achieve their long-term ends, Cherry (2010) argues that animal rights activists engage in boundary blurring by universalizing the struggles of oppressed beings everywhere, attempting to dismantle the symbolic boundaries that separate humans and nonhuman animals. A related strategy involves *boundary-crossing*, wherein physically, discursively, or via iconography, the activists deploy a range of strategies to convey similarities or parallel conditions experienced by humans and nonhumans alike. A certain segment of the population already has the affective dispositions and shares a degree of empathy, which fosters more positive attitudes toward animals and enhances the identification with and similarities between humans and nonhuman animals (Erlanger and Tsytarev 2012; Hansson and Jacobsson 2014).

The current paper argues that the above strategies will yield some positive results, but that there are sociological limits to full equality that for the most part cannot be transcended due to the status differences and social locations of nonhuman animals vis-à-vis homo sapiens. Human beings cross-culturally and historically have wrestled with the issue of defining “others” as equals and, by extension, equally deserving (Andreouli and Dashtipour 2014; Phillips et al. 2014; Yukich 2013). Most cultures clearly demarcate the social boundaries separating dominant groups from others in subordinate positions (Clifton 2013;

Miles 1989). Even within societies or specific communities, group boundaries distinguish among various categories of social relations (McGregor 2012; Milner 1994a; Silva and Leao 2012). Nowhere does one interact with or treat all others equally, at least in terms of most forms of social status and interpersonal relations. Humans do not spend equal time with each other, establish the same levels of intimacy, or share resources of *any* kind in equal proportion with all other members of the broader community. There are both self-imposed cultural and structural limits to the capacity to establish absolute social equality. To effect change, then, “animal rights activists seek to dismantle the symbolic boundaries between humans and animals” (Cherry 2010: 455).

Expanding the argument to then implicate various *other* species as equals requires that animal right advocates overcome their sociological naïveté. At some level, biological competition ensures that life will always destroy life and certain *natural* differences emerge in nature. Indeed, primatology research has established that the rates of lethal aggression among chimpanzees, for example, are far higher than among humans, consistent with the idea that adaptive strategies include the elimination of rivals to enhance genetic survival (Wilson and Wrangham 2003; Wilson et al. 2014). Beyond intra-species aggression, the predominance of interspecific competition characterizes every ecosystem at some level where resources of various kinds are contested (e.g., Dupuch et al. 2014; Kamilar et al. 2014; Stokes et al. 2012). In short, various forms of organismic inequality inevitably arise in nature, as species typically privilege their own kind in struggles for survival and reproductive fitness. Yet such a framing fails to tap into the sociological roots of the limits of human compassion and the protection of animal rights. That requires a much more detailed theoretical analysis of status relationships. Whatever one might believe ideologically about animal rights, the current paper argues that, from a sociological perspective, nonhuman animals will have enormous difficulty achieving a moral or comparable social status to *Homo sapiens* due to their disadvantaged social locations. Their statuses may be raised in relative terms, but only to a limited degree and in specific contexts.

THE THEORY OF STATUS RELATIONSHIPS AND ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISM

Contrary to popular and religious beliefs, there are clear sociological limits to compassion and, by extension, animal rights, if one defines compassion as sympathy for others accompanied by a desire to alleviate

their suffering. Although humans often extend their compassion to assist and to protect many other species, in no human society are these species treated *exactly* the same as human beings, i.e., with the same rights, privileges, and social *status*.² Milner's (1994a) general theory of status relations helps explain why, for status has certain qualities as a resource that differ markedly from economic and political resources. Milner (2010: 381) defines status as "the accumulated approvals and disapprovals that people express toward an individual, a collectivity, or object." As such, status operates on an independent axis not reducible to economic and political power. The Weberian tripartite division applies, then, with the argument that social, economic and political resources (which are often overlapping and mutually reinforcing) nevertheless have an analytic independence – and sometimes an empirical independence too. For example, Milner (1994a, 2004) posits that status as a resource assumes even greater significance or influence in social contexts where economic and political resources are less prominent, such as the Indian caste system or among American teenagers. The explanation stems for the fact that status has two properties that other resources do *not* have: inalienability and inexpandibility.

According to Milner (2005, 2010), status has an inalienable quality that reflects the judgments of others. As a resource that others confer upon the person or object in question, status cannot be appropriated arbitrarily or simply claimed on one's own behalf. Rather, status depends upon the evaluations of others and, as such, to change one's status requires a change in the balance of approvals and disapprovals. The process works both ways, such that one can either gain *or* lose status only through changing opinions of others.

A second characteristic, inexpandibility, helps distinguish status further from economic and political resources. The latter two types of resources can be increased exponentially. The sudden accumulation of wealth certainly can occur and often radically alters economic landscapes (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg). The acquisition of allies or stocks of weapons can produce substantial changes in the distribution of political power. Thus economic and political resources can be expanded dramatically, both in absolute and relative terms. In contrast, status cannot be manufactured or otherwise increased to a significant degree, existing instead mainly in a *relational* context.

Within status hierarchies, an individual's ascension tends to be accompanied by someone else's slippage in his or her relative ranking. Not everyone will be viewed as equally popular, beautiful, "cool," or talented (Milner 2004). Not every teacher or athlete can be one's

favorite, although who occupies the pinnacle of the status pyramid may change in time. The theory implies that everyone cannot achieve an elite status because an inflationary process would quickly set in to diminish the relative worth of one's achievement or position. If too many people garner the same recognition or awards, then that means nothing really distinguishes the honoree from everyone else who receives the same accolades (see Collins 2001). No special status accrues in comparison with other recipients.

Herein lies the crux of the dilemma for animal rights activists: the difficulty in breaking down the status hierarchy that places humans at the pinnacle that ensures all other species have an inferior status (Walker 2013). In cases of discrimination and oppression based on gender, ethnic membership, religion, sexual orientation or any disadvantaged "Other," the key status advantage that could be claimed on their behalf involved their membership in humanity. Thus while various liberation struggles continue apace as different subgroups compete for status and scarce resources, the difficulties for nonhuman species are multiplied significantly by virtue of their "outsider" status and as a function of the sheer numbers of other species. At the same time, nonhuman animals face two additional challenges in terms of acquiring status, both of which have direct implications for animal rights activists and the efficacy of their campaigns.

Milner (2005, 2010) argues that there are two primary mechanisms through which one competes effectively to achieve status: 1) the degree to which individuals conform to the prevailing norms; and 2) associating with those who have higher status. First, those who adhere to existing collective norms acquire status primarily by the reference group in question, since standards vary across groups. The worker who arrives on time regularly, cooperates with colleagues, and produces at a high level will be recognized as a dependable, effective employee. The teacher who inspires students with dynamic lectures and who demonstrates a real passion for the subject will receive excellent evaluations. Jacobsson and Lindblom (2012) demonstrate that within the animal rights movement, activists who adhered more closely to the ideals of ceasing to consume animals or use animal products for human purposes altogether attained the highest status. The actual animals, however, do not have the same capacities as humans and thereby confront even greater challenges to acquiring status, as well as equal rights and "citizenship" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).

The logic can be extended further to account for more dramatic gains in status. Wherever people exceed the normative expectations or

demonstrate a level of proficiency beyond what most of their contemporaries display, such individuals may be rewarded further through promotions, awards, or public recognition. Exceptional performances – a special type of conformity *par excellence* – serve as a particularly reliable means for acquiring status, all else constant. As Driessens (2013:544) has argued, “Most (superstars) thus catch people’s attention by exploiting a certain talent, or achieving something, which also applies to heroes.” But the most compelling performances might be described as “other-worldly” or, in Durkheimian terms, approaching that of the “sacred.” Those rare individuals who achieve the highest ideals of ritual purification ascend to the uppermost echelons of the moral hierarchy to achieve a sacred status (Milner 1994b).

The second mechanism involves the degree to which one associates with those of higher or lower status. *Ceteris paribus*, associating with those of higher status increases one’s status, whereas spending time with low-status individuals decreases one’s status. Hence an important status distinction exists between “house animals” and “farm animals,” stemming from the former group’s more intimate relationship with their owners (Cherry 2010; see Herzog 2010). Social associations are mainly relevant, though, to the degree that these are public knowledge. Hence the importance of “being seen” with others, which spans every social context from which celebrities appear with whom to seating arrangements in high school lunchrooms (Milner 2004, 2005). The increase in status, however, generally requires that the social association occurs without coercion or as a result of a financial transaction. The notion of “paying” someone for their company, for example, tends to devalue the status of both individuals involved.

In summation, Milner (2005, 2010) argues that status as a resource by definition can be acquired only through the positive evaluations of others. The inexpandable nature of the resource means that one’s position in a status hierarchy depends upon how one fares relative to everyone else. Acquiring status requires the ability to excel in terms of collective expectations, or at least to conform appropriately to extant group norms. Moreover, social associations with high-status individuals usually further enhance one’s relative status. Yet those who interact already have specific status locations as well, rooted in their relational contexts: the social structures or “geometry” that define each entity’s social position (Black 1995, 2000).

ENHANCING STATUS EVALUATIONS: THE INTIMACY FACTOR

Consistent with the theory outlined, one should consider the social locations of those involved in relationships with one another. For example, those with whom human beings are more intimate (low relational distance) tend to be evaluated more positively, *ceteris paribus*, than those who are more relationally distant (see Black 1995, 2000).³ That proposition helps explain why the mothers and other intimates of alleged murderers can scarcely imagine that the accused might be guilty. Indeed, as a result of their intimacy and presumed biases, family members and intimates of the accused are ineligible to serve on the jury in a trial. Consistent with Milner's perspective, spending more time together (social associations) and creating a higher degree of intimacy enhance one's status relative to those who are more relationally distant.

Furthermore, those who have more similar cultural backgrounds tend to view their "own kind" more positively than those who are different (Polek et al. 2010, Reisinger and Turner 2003; see Jasinskaja et al. 2006). A common linguistic background creates the foundation for a more intimate understanding of one another, as well as the ability to communicate in a fashion that conforms to one's pre-existing framework. A shared religion also reinforces the "collective effervescence" to help ensure that normative boundaries can be identified and honored (Durkheim 1995[1912]). The more extensive the interweaving of cultural trappings, the more readily one acquires a positive status relative to others who do *not* share similar backgrounds to the same extent. Indeed, cultural distinctions or cultural distance often serve as the basis of far more negative, hostile, or even genocidal reactions (see Campbell 2009).

Even wealth differences may introduce status advantages, at least in capitalist societies or those where significant social inequality exists. Those who occupy positions of power and privilege generally may be evaluated more favorably, all else constant. On the other hand, those who are exploited by those in positions of power and privilege, or "innocent victims," may *also* receive status advantages under certain circumstances. Such victims acquire more status if they are systematically disadvantaged or mistreated within democratic systems, or denied their rights relative to others. And while some groups may share a degree of collective liability if evaluated in the negative, the opposite applies too: those who are perceived to be suffering a similar plight as a collective whole are supported more often than lone individuals who may be suffering (Smith et al. 2013). In short, the likelihood of achieving

status by virtue of being an “innocent victim” may reflect the social recognition of social disadvantages that accrue through the systematic denial of equal rights under extant arrangements for some group or another.

Milner’s theory of status relations, therefore, can be extended to argue that the intimacy factor, especially in terms of relational involvement and cultural similarities, can enhance or detract from one’s status. Together these sociological conditions help explain why nonhuman animals have relative degrees of status inferiority as compared to human beings. The reasoning will be applied to demonstrate the challenges that animal rights activists must confront from a sociological perspective. The main thesis can be summarized succinctly in advance: nonhuman animals tend to occupy an inferior status relative to human beings because of the nature of status as a resource and as a result of their disadvantaged social locations. To mount an effective animal right campaign would require changing the underlying structural and relational conditions that have long demarcated the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals.

NONHUMAN ANIMALS’ INFERIOR STATUS

Animal rights advocates confront a rather daunting challenge to engage the public effectively in an effort to shift their views about animals, especially in terms of challenging the predominant ideology of speciesism in an effort to mobilize the forces of social change. Lowe (2008: 4) describes these efforts as “sociological warfare”: “The primary goal of ‘sociological warfare’ is to alter the public moral imagination regarding perceptions of the place of nonhuman animals within postindustrial societies.” Lowe insightfully highlights Shannon Keith’s (2006) film *Behind the Mask* and her sympathetic portrayal of convicted Animal Liberation Front (ALF) activists as deeply ethical agents of nonviolent social change. The net result of presenting activists in such a positive light helps to undermine law enforcement portrayals of the activists as “terrorists,” while also elevating their moral standing by linking their actions to legitimate liberation movements.

At the same time, the process of status acquisition generally should occur “naturally,” in that actively campaigning for popularity or to increase one’s status usually incurs some type of backlash.⁴ In the case of animal rights activism (and social movements in general), the advocates in question pose real threats to the interests of various stakeholders and, not surprisingly, can expect counter-offensives to challenge the legitimacy of their claims in an effort to discredit their positions (Munro

1999). Hence animal rights activists must be strategic in their usage of symbolism and strategies to avoid alienating potential recruits and larger segments of the target population (see Wrenn 2013). The activities outlined so far, however, highlight what might be done simply to enhance the status of the activists themselves. What about the animals?

The animal rights activists argue that there are many speciesist arguments that privilege human beings over all other nonhuman species (Bailey 2007; Bruers, 2012; Lemelin 2013). From a political or ideological standpoint, their cause resonates quite well with certain liberal-progressive or even radical platforms aimed at transforming the social world. Yet whatever the noble intentions that might be advanced from a moralistic standpoint, there are clear sociological limitations to their aspirations. Consider, for example, the case of the Animals in War Memorial in Hyde Park. In his public lecture entitled “Animals in War,” Sorenson (2013) delivered a compelling critique of the fact that animals have been forced since time immemorial to serve human ends, including the commission of all manner of acts of violence. Midway through the lecture, Professor Sorenson noted that England’s Animals in War Memorial had been under attack, with one critic arguing that countless civilians and noncombatants died in wars over the years without receiving public recognition or memorials on their behalf. In response, Sorenson (2013) argued that while certainly human beings have suffered, people should still extend compassion in equal measure to the suffering of other animal species “who had no choice” but to be coopted in the service of humans:

“(George) Monbiot is correct in observing that British memorials overlook civilians victimized in war, but he too seems outraged that any recognition of the suffering of animals is mentioned unless every last human victim is counted up beforehand, as if we only have a certain amount of sympathy and compassion, and we have to measure this out on a scale of more or less worthy victims (with) the lines of species, you know, defining the worthiness of victims. And in fact, these complaints seem to be simply another version of the standard speciesist complaint...used to delegitimize animal advocacy: ‘you care more about animals more than you do about people,’ delivered as if to suggest that these should be mutually exclusive.”

Whether or not such “care” should or should not be mutually exclusive reflects the morality of those staking their oppositional claims in the

animal rights debate. From a sociological perspective, nonhuman animal species are on the whole incapable of achieving a comparable status to that of human beings. The “worthiness” of victims, as with any status, reflects the social conditions that either enhance or detract from one’s status as an individual or even at the group, community, societal or “species” level. One can wish and even advocate for the equal rights of nonhuman species, but one cannot expect that anything approaching real equality will be achieved. The sociological conditions are simply not conducive to such full equality, although some movement might be achieved through strategic activism.

In those cases where nonhuman animals measure up more effectively, their exceptional statuses usually relate to their designation as sacred entities (see below). Most people rank human beings ahead of all or virtually all other species, often supporting an implicit hierarchy within the animal kingdom (Berry 2004; see Conein 2011). Furthermore, an important sociological point relates to the idea that even those animals to whom people are most attached do not typically enjoy absolute or full recognition on a par with human beings. There are clear differences in terms of participation in decision-making, control of resources, cognitive abilities, communication, and normative standards regulating virtually all types of behaviors. A specific individual or family may privilege household pets as “equal” family members, but even there a status hierarchy almost surely prevails to the advantage of human versus nonhuman members (Arluke and Sanders 1996).

For instance, to the extent that decisions surrounding health and well-being must be made in a zero-sum context of available resources, then human members usually stand to benefit at the expense of nonhumans (see Beirne 2011). That does not deny that there may be some who care more about or who elevate the status of nonhuman species or their own pets to a comparable level, at least in principle, with human beings. On the whole, though, the care and concern for nonhuman animals do not measure up to that afforded humans – and that cannot be created simply because of one’s preferences or even political advocacy devoid of any other change. The status hierarchies that exist cross-culturally and historically differentiate those deemed as worthy of human compassion in *relative* terms, just as with any status hierarchy.

Could additional status be manufactured to create greater sympathy for nonhuman animals, or an enhanced status beyond what already exists? From a sociological standpoint, only to a limited degree. In a practical sense, one only has a fixed amount of time to contemplate such matters, to advocate for nonhuman species, or even to include them in one’s

prayers. The more a person commits to advocating for nonhumans, the less one can commit to advocating on behalf of humans. Just as an individual typically will reserve a special status for one's "true love" or partner, nearly all people at some level differentiate between their "love" (and compassion) for human beings vis-à-vis their "love" for other animals. The care and compassion that one has for human beings and any other species may not be entirely mutually exclusive, but one cannot deny that clear limits exist in terms of the human capacity to create sufficient status to ensure nonhuman species are evaluated positively to the same degree.

The exceptions appear to be those historical instances involving distinct species, such as the sacred hawk among certain Native American tribes or, perhaps most famously, the sacred cow associated with Hinduism in India (as well as other religions and in other countries). The cultural reasons as to the origins of their special statuses are not of concern here, but rather simply the fact that species can and have achieved such a sacred status among select human societies. Consistent with Milner's (1994b) argument, their sacred status reflects the status transformation processes associated with worship rituals that differentiate between the sacred and the profane. Across diverse ecological and cultural contexts, select nonhuman species have been linked to clan totems or otherwise attained sacred status (Wang 2013). Yet here again such statuses once more reflect a hierarchy, for the statuses of virtually all other species pale in comparison.⁵ Furthermore, the nonhuman animals' inability to engage in the appropriate rituals, especially in regard to conformity and association (and ultimately to achieve salvation), ensures that human beings will continue to occupy superior statuses relative to any and all remaining species.

NONCONFORMITY AND CONFORMITY TO GROUP NORMS

Nonhuman animals suffer their greatest status deficit in terms of their relative inability to conform to the broader norms that apply to human beings. The fact that other species produce and contribute almost nothing of cultural or economic significance to human beings irreparably damages their status credibility on the whole. If other animals *were* able to enrich the human condition by offering artistic or linguistic advances, discovering new ideas or technologies, or by enhancing productivity, then these animals would almost certainly be evaluated in vastly different terms. Indeed, whenever evidence arises that demonstrates *greater* capacities among species than previously imagined, that usually

enhances the status of the species in question – and the cultural gap between human animals (as “persons”) and nonhuman animals narrows somewhat (see Singer 2014; Gunnarsson 2008). Unfortunately, for most species, their relative *lack* of contributions in all fields of human experience helps ensure their failure to achieve a comparable status.

Moreover, nonhuman animals generally cannot and do not participate in the types of intimate behaviors, especially involving bodily functions such as eating and sexual relations, or the more significant normative spheres of social life – including sacred rituals – that are the cultural cornerstones of every society. While nonhuman animals may be treated like family in certain contexts, there are still typically rather strict boundaries that define the limits of their participation in human social endeavors and hence their ability to conform to prevailing group norms. That inability to participate in most of the important spheres of social life means that nonhuman animals simply do not have the opportunity to conform and achieve higher status, even if they possessed certain capacities that might allow greater or fuller participation. What, if anything, might other species do to enhance their statuses, independently of human actions?

One sphere that holds promise for enhancing their relative status involves the extent to which other species can engage in effective forms of intersubjective communication. Young’s (2013) auto-ethnographic account of the inter-species communication between his feline Rocky and himself confirms that, at least in this particular case, the nonhuman animal and his human family have achieved a level of interspecific intersubjectivity that allows for the daily cohabitation of a common life world. Countless animals have impressed individuals and families along various lines (see Kaminski et al. 2009), but still have not been elevated to the status of full equals in all spheres of interactions with and among human beings. At the collective level, those species that display enhanced linguistic or other forms of communication typically acquire more status or receive more positive evaluations than other more “limited” species (Arbib et al. 2008; Constance et al. 1995; see Wilson 1977).⁶ The highest status continues to be accorded to those species, such as bonobos and chimpanzees, who can communicate with humans in profound ways that bridge the cultural gaps between human and nonhuman (see Bradshaw 2010).

A distinct advantage that many species may have relative to human beings concerns the degree to which they have *not* caused conflict or violated important social norms to the *detriment* of their status. Instead, the expectations of nonhumans tend to be minimal or perhaps almost

childlike. Most household pets, for example, are praised for their cuteness, friendliness, or their unconditional love. Thus a great many animals engender positive evaluations that at least reinforce their relative value or importance as family or quasi-family members. Should an animal violate the household norms such as soiling the living room rug, destroying a family possession, or even attacking someone through some form of aggression, then that obviously may elicit negative reactions. Yet because of their presumed childlike innocence, many pets may be spared the wrath that might otherwise be reserved for humans. The opposite may occur, though, if animals are socially more distant and inferior, i.e., they may be treated more harshly than their human counterparts and experience similar degradation ceremonies that humans often endure. Indeed, human beings who violate important social norms often suffer a clear loss of status, which may be reflected further in negative comparisons with nonhumans.⁷

The negative comparisons include a great many species, such as calling someone a “dirty dog” (or a snake) for their lying or unethical tendencies, a “vulture” for insensitive or aggressive advances, or simply a “pig” for gluttonous behavior. Calling someone a “cockroach,” or the lowest of life forms, reflects a special degree of contempt for the individual or group in question (see Hatzfeld 2005). The use of these terms as forms of cultural degradation reflects and reinforces the negative stereotypes and inferior status of nonhuman animals, much like sexist or racist comments reflect a devaluation of status associated with these specific characteristics. Indeed, the use of animal imagery to justify oppression, domination, and even genocide works well “because we take for granted the prior assumption that violence against the animal is ethically permissible” (Wolfe 2009: 567).

ACQUIRING STATUS THROUGH INTIMACY: THE NONHUMAN ANIMAL CASE

Beyond the issue of group norms, another means for achieving a more elevated status among human and nonhuman animals alike involves social recognition and the intimacy created through the naming process. Most household pets, for example, typically receive personal monikers that set them apart from non-pets and enhance their intimacy and identification with their human counterparts (Brandes 2009; Franklin 1999). As Brandes (2012:6) explains, “various species of cattle, barnyard animals, and other creatures that occupy space outside the home are rarely given names, human or otherwise.” Some family pets ultimately

are treated quite literally as members of the family, enjoying the same privileges and recognition that their human counterparts receive. Quite simply, intimacy fosters humanization, while social distance generates dehumanization (Butterfield et al. 2012; Costello and Hodson 2009).

Table 1. U.S. National Poll of Owners' Relationships with Their Pets ($n = 1,110$)

Which comes closest to the way you feel about how your pet fits into your family?	
50%	My pet is just as much a part of the family as any other person in the household.
36%	My pet is part of the family, but not as much as the people in the household.
13%	My pet is part of my household, but not part of my family.
1%	Don't know/Refused
What is/are your pet's name?	
49%	Human names (human names only <i>plus</i> multiple pets, some with human names)
46%	Non-human names only
6%	Refused
Where does your pet sleep?	
30%	In your bed
33%	In its own bed or cage
13%	Outdoors
23%	Somewhere else
1%	Don't know/Refused
Have you ever bought an outfit for your pet?	
19%	Yes
81%	No
Would you say your pet has its own sense of style, or don't you feel that way?	
43%	Yes, own sense of style
54%	No, don't feel that way
2%	Don't know/Refused
Do you celebrate your pet's birthday, or the day it came to live with you, or not?	
27%	Yes
72%	No
1%	Don't know/Refused
How often does your pet eat 'human food' instead of special pet food?	
12%	Always
31%	Sometimes
30%	Rarely
27%	Never

Source: Roper (2009), GfK Public Affairs and Media, "The AP-Petside.com Poll."

Polling data confirm that roughly half of the pet owners in the United States feel that their pet “is just as much a part of my family as any other person in the household” (Roper 2009). A similar percentage has given their pets human names and three in ten respondents claim that their pets share the bed with them (see Table 1). The limits of full equality and recognition nevertheless can be seen in the smaller proportions of the populace who purchase outfits for their pets, celebrate their birthdays, and share human food with their pets.

Finally, the extent to which nonhuman animals might be recognized for their cognitive and emotional capacities, or possessing distinct “selves” should enhance their relative status too (Irvine 2007). The tendency to imbue pets with anthropomorphic traits almost surely reflects the level of intimacy established, their family member status, and their distinct social locations relative to other animals either within or beyond their immediate households. Yet that special status does *not* necessarily extend universally, as human beings in Western cultures typically reserve special statuses for their individual pets. For example, a recent survey of university students revealed that while the vast majority agreed that their pets “should be considered just as much a part of the family as any other person in the household,” most felt too that “the well-being of children within families is far more important than the well-being of any family pets.” Interestingly, while opinions were divided for statements regarding the value of human and nonhuman life (e.g., “I value nonhuman life just as much as I value human life”), only 8 percent agreed that “human beings should be vegans” (Michalski 2015).

Not unexpectedly, then, the animal rights activists and scholars have long argued that existing hegemonic powers exploit nonhuman animals and justify their oppression by asserting the primacy of the human species (Peggs 2009). Berry (2004) has argued that the suffering of companion animals assumes greater significance in comparison with other animals. In effect, those animals with whom we are more intimate will evince more compassion and an elevated status as “innocent victims” compared to those who are socially more distant. The naming process creates an even stronger attachment, while the identification of the animal as a family member enhances their status further – though not to the level of full equality (Brandes 2012; see Fitzgerald 2010). Most important, not everyone can achieve equal status as *victims* for precisely the same reasons outlined previously: a status hierarchy exists that can accommodate only a limited array of worthy victims, with human beings almost always earning a privileged position relative to their nonhuman counterparts. As Rock (2002: 16) suggests, “becoming a victim can be a

matter of contrasting claims made before disparate audiences with different powers to censure and reward, and the recognition of one victim may be secured only at the perceived cost to another.” Where both humans and nonhuman animals have endured some level of suffering, Fitzgerald (2010) confirms that the risks posed to human beings garner far more attention and concern.

The inferior status of nonhuman animals, for that matter, can be linked partly to their relative inability to advocate for themselves or to redress unilaterally the imbalance of power via the legal system and cultural symbols in general. The first actual lawsuit naming five actual orcas as the plaintiffs (filed by PETA, marine-mammal experts, and two former orca trainers) involved an alleged violation of their *constitutional rights*, or specifically a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment that prohibits the condition of slavery – without mentioning *personhood* as a necessary precondition (PETA 2011). Judge Jeffrey Miller, the first U.S. judge in history to consider arguments regarding the application of the U.S. Constitution and the slavery prohibition as applicable to other species, dismissed the case in his ruling that the Thirteenth Amendment did *not* apply to nonhumans (O’Connor 2012). Although unsuccessful, the case set a precedent for activists hoping to continue to push for further protections of nonhuman animals, the expansion of animal rights, and a marginal increase in the status hierarchy.

CONCLUSIONS

The current paper has argued that the sociological limits of status as a resource ensures that nonhuman animals for the most part will not be granted full and comparable status to human beings, even in terms of being “innocent victims” exploited by humans. The activists involved in total liberation, then, face a conundrum: how to shift the boundaries of personhood to include more broadly nonhuman animals as equally deserving in the moral hierarchy, especially since nonhuman animals: a) have only a rudimentary ability to conform to significant norms; b) do not participate in most forms of social life to the same degree with their human counterparts; and c) have far more relational and cultural distance (with some limited exceptions), as well as social and normative inferiority, compared to human animals. These conditions, from a sociological standpoint, situate nonhuman animals forever in an inferior status position relative to human beings. The dehumanization process employed to devalue and debase other members of the human tribe on the basis of socially constructed categories race (see Hattery et al. 20014)

apparently can be accomplished far more readily in evaluating nonhumans.

In addition, the more relationally and culturally distant, the more difficult the challenge in terms of achieving full and equal recognition as innocent victims. With only rare exceptions (most of which are culturally frowned upon), nonhuman animals do not share the same level or types of intimacy with humans that others of their own species do. As Moore and Kosut (2014: 519) acknowledge in their ethnography of bees that “as ethnographers we are limited, with few tools to inhabit the spaces of bee-ness. It is decidedly more difficult to interpret these non-human actors. We don’t speak their language, share their culture, (or) engage in mutually negotiated intimate acts with them.” The inability to communicate through the same language or to share in or replicate human culture in other meaningful ways creates a gap that helps reinforce their status inferiority. If victims are to be claimed and compassion granted, the theoretical logic outlined here in combination with the empirical evidence confirm that nonhuman animals are not and may never be on a sociological par with human beings. But there might be exceptions.

To effectively break down the hierarchy of human privilege, a species would have to be able to transcend the linguistic and cultural barriers that help sustain such profound inequality. The scientific evidence indicates that that *may* be possible, for example, among certain primates such as bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), who have cognitive and communicative capacities that permit a degree of interspecific symbolic exchange previously believed impossible (Savage-Rumbaugh and Fields 2000). The researchers argue that a *Pan-Homo* community has been established that allows for bicultural communication (Savage-Rumbaugh 1997). In fact, Savage-Rumbaugh et al. (2007) jointly published the first collaborative research article co-authored by *Homo Sapien* (Sue Savage-Rumbaugh) and *Pan paniscus* (Kanzi Wamba, Panbanisha Wamba, and Nyota Wamba). The issue of authorship elevates the three bonobos’ status to that of scientific colleagues, co-producing evidence and offering a direct “voice” not inconsistent with the voices of the oppressed that emerge in other forms of participatory action research. As Savage-Rumbaugh et al. (2007: 17) explain:

“Why rely solely on the judgments of human beings when one can ask the apes for their own opinions?...The bonobos have contributed directly, through conversation, to important aspects of this work. Their listing as authors is not a literary technique but a recognition

of their direct verbal input to the article. They are not able to write, but they are able to speak, to use lexigrams, and to answer questions.”

Advocacy and anthropomorphism can help to articulate important characteristics that may enhance the status of nonhuman animals to a limited degree, just as having pets with names and living in homes can create a much more intense identification with animals as “members of the family.” There can be no question that at least in some individual circumstances, certain pets or other nonhuman animals occupy privileged positions within status hierarchies. Some almost certainly will be viewed as “innocent victims” worthy of rescue and compassion (Markovits and Queen 2009), while some individuals grant full moral status to their pets and companions (Young 2013). At the collective level, however, nonhuman animals continue to occupy an inferior status relative to human beings and are viewed as less worthy or deserving of compassion. An unlimited well of compassion does *not* exist, but rather will be determined by the same processes that underlie the creation of any type of status hierarchy and based upon the social locations of those entities being evaluated. Those animal rights activists who can overcome the sociological naïveté will more effectively help at least some species to ascend in the status hierarchy to achieve fuller moral recognition. Most nonhuman animals, at least for the foreseeable future, nevertheless will continue to occupy inferior positions in the status competition that underlies the human condition.

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ENDNOTES

¹A number of academics and activists alike have established advocacy positions with their public critiques and through various forms of published research (Aaltola 2011; Bradshaw 2010; Corman 2014; Donovan 2006; Hudson 2011; Peek et al. 1996; Sorenson 2013). In the extreme, Kochi and Ordan (2008) even argue that since humans are essentially responsible for global violence and environmental destruction, we should as enlightened beings consider in principle the possibility and ethical implications of the self-inflicted extermination of the entire human species to allow others to thrive.

²The "sacred" status of certain animals in particular cultures might appear to contradict that claim to some degree, but the privileges enjoyed by such species nevertheless do not accord them full or equal status in the various social spheres as members of the *human* society that holds them in such special regard.

³The current argument draws upon the analytic work of Donald Black (1976) who attempted to revolutionize sociological thinking with his ground-breaking work *The Behavior of Law*. Black has described his approach as “pure sociology,” wherein the analyst explains observable variations in behavior within “a multidimensional social space with locations, directions, and distances defined by human interaction itself” (Black 1979: 150).

⁴For example, consider the reaction to Rickey Henderson’s Muhammad Ali-esque speech after he broke the all-time base-stealing record in baseball: “Lou Brock was the symbol of great base stealing. But today, I’m the greatest of all time.” The negative public reaction to his bravado prompted the following response from Henderson: “As soon as I said it, it ruined everything. Everybody thought it was the worst thing you could ever say. Those words haunt me to this day” (Manoloff 2002:D6).

⁵Apart from the “sacred,” there are a great many species that have special spiritual significance among certain populations, such as the sea turtles among Fijians (Morgan 2007) or the buffalo among the Plains Indians. These species may yet be consumed or incorporated into ritualistic practices, once more reflecting and reinforcing a culturally-specific status hierarchy. That hierarchy most often implies that certain species are clearly inferior, “dirty,” or otherwise designated to be at the service and disposal of human beings (e.g., Sillitoe 2001; Bollig 1996).

⁶Other characteristics beyond language can enhance the relative statuses of nonhuman species too, such as their perceived “attractiveness.” As Frynta et al. (2011:833) explain: “If we assume that we inherently share an idea of what is beautiful and desirable in an animal, it is easy to imagine selective support or neglect of endangered species.”

⁷As an example, consider Susan Hawk’s (2004) final speech on the first season of the television series *Survivor*, where she offered the following comments to the two finalists: “I plead to the jury tonight to think a little bit about the island we have been on. This island is pretty much full of only two things: snakes and rats. And in the end of Mother Nature, we have Richard the snake, who knowingly went after prey; and Kelly, who turned into the rat that ran around like rats do on this island, trying to run from the snake. I feel we owe it to the island spirits that we have learned to come to know to let it be in the end the way Mother Nature intended it to be: For the snake to eat the rat.”

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