

FRIEND OR FOOD: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ANIMALS AND CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATION

Filip TRAJKOVSKI

PhD Candidate,

Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Sociology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

filip.sociolog@yahoo.com

UDC: 316.613.4-053.2:179.3

ABSTRACT:

Starting from the contemporary cultural artefact of representing animals simultaneously as friends and as food—most visibly in fast-food “happy meals” that juxtapose cheerful animal characters as toys or images with the dismembered body parts of animals served as food—this article examines the role of such dissonant cultural discourses and practices directed toward children. These processes function primarily as mechanisms for normalizing and reproducing dominant human–animal relations in Western societies. The analysis illustrates that animals are largely defined through their forms of relation to humans, which depend on their perceived (dis)utility to human purposes. In this sense, animals are socially constructed in ways that legitimate their instrumental use by humans. The article draws on a Foucauldian framework that links knowledge and power relations, combined with an interpretation of Weberian typology of social action, both within the context of childhood socialization. This indicates the need for a specifically sociological analysis of what and how children learn about animals. Accordingly, the article offers a sociological contribution to the emerging interdisciplinary field of animal studies and to the sociology of childhood.

Keywords: *animals, social construction, representation, discourse, knowledge, power, social action, childhood socialization.*

Introduction

Adults have long recognized that the natural affinity between children and animals can be utilized to teach valuable social skills such as empathy, kindness, and compassion. Through identification with animals, children develop empathy that extends to other humans, learning the distinction between treating others well and treating them poorly. Moreover, relations with animals contribute to children’s identity formation, shaping their understanding of themselves and others. This affinity also explains the pervasive presence of animal representations in children’s toys, literature, and art, where animals serve as accessible symbols for social and moral learning.

This article examines the social construction of human–animal relations within the context of childhood socialization, focusing particularly on how children learn to perceive and use animals as resources for food, clothing, entertainment, education, and companionship. It considers the interrelated roles of cultural discourses and practices that shape these processes. Children encounter

dominant representations of animals through various socialization sites—mass media, social media, games, and formal education—where they tacitly internalize and reproduce normative discourses about “appropriate” relations with animals, such as loving some, eating others, or observing the rest.

However, children’s learning about animals is far from a simple or coherent process. Popular culture often presents contradictory messages. For instance, the animated film *Chicken Run* (2000) invites children to identify with animal characters struggling to escape becoming food, while at the same time, fast-food chains such as Burger King offered promotional tie-ins with toy representations of the characters paired with meals containing animal products. This paradox epitomizes the dissonant discourses and practices through which children are socialized into dominant human–animal relations. This article therefore adopts a sociological perspective to analyze how such contradictions operate within broader systems of representation, discourse, and power.

Social discourses and practices of constructing the animals: A Foucauldian perspective

Animals are primarily defined and categorized according to their forms of relation with human beings. Broadly speaking, these relations depend on knowledge claims about the utility or disutility of animals to humans. In Western cultural contexts, to “know” animals is to participate in the enactment of these claims. We “know” that chickens are “useful” because they are consumed as “food”; we “know” that rats are “not useful” because they are exterminated as “vermin.” In this way, discourses and practices mutually recall, reinforce, and legitimate each other.

Although animals undoubtedly exist independently in nature, once incorporated into human social worlds they are assigned human categories based on their perceived uses. These classifications—lab animal, pet, livestock—shape not only how animals are perceived but also how they are treated. As DeMello observes, “once an animal has been classified as a pet, it would, in our culture, be difficult to turn that animal into meat. Similarly, we don’t think twice about consuming animals that have been classified as livestock” (2021, p. 340).

This approach aligns with a broadly social constructionist perspective on human–animal relations, which examines how humans “think about and interact with them” (Arluke & Sanders, 1996, p. 9). Arluke and Sanders suggest that “‘being’ an animal in modern societies may be less a matter of biology than it is an issue of human culture and consciousness” (ibid). Extending this view, one might ask: What is an animal outside of culture? As Tester famously noted, “a fish is only a fish if you classify it as one” (1991, p. 46). While animals may resist such inscriptions, social constructions typically succeed in reducing them to physical or discursive matter for redeployment in human practices and representations. In this regard, “the naming of types of animals, that is, their categorization, is the key to their thingification; their reduction to non-agential manipulable resources for discourse and practice” (Cole & Steward, 2014, p. 14).

This issue strikes at the core of Foucault's analysis of the interrelationship between knowledge and power, or between discourse and practice, in the constitution of hegemonic relations in Western societies. Foucault's work focused on the "knowable individual," situated within networks of power—as one who is to be trained, corrected, supervised, and controlled. Although his concern was with humans, these insights can be extended to "knowable animals."¹ Two aspects are particularly relevant: how discourses conceptualize animals as particular kinds of entities (relations of knowledge), and how animals are materially positioned and subjected to practices that enact these conceptualizations (relations of power). As Foucault insisted, "more knowledge, more power; more power—knowledge imposing itself as law" (2019, p. 209).

Within children's culture, these dynamics operate as a mutually reinforcing cycle: specific spaces facilitate specific practices that both enact and reproduce discursive conceptualizations. Placing an animal in a "farm," for instance, materializes the concept of "farm animal" and simultaneously reaffirms its meaning through the juxtaposition of animal, space, and farming practices. Such discursive formations are further disseminated through cultural representations of animals across children's media—stories, films, magazines, food packaging, toys, digital games, and educational materials.

Foucault argued that knowledge is produced within particular disciplinary contexts such as prisons, barracks, or schools. This knowledge is inseparable from practices of correction and normalization of the prisoner, recruit, or pupil, individualizing at the same time as it homogenizes categories of knowable others. Material practices—confinement, surveillance, feeding, measuring—generate knowledge that refines relations of power. As he observed, "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (1982, p. 361). This insight is crucial not only for understanding how animals are captured within spaces of confinement but also for examining how children are located within spaces of socialization—whether institutional (the home, the school) or cultural (the cinema, digital media, and beyond).

Conceptual map of constructing the animals through social action: A Weberian perspective

Resting on commonsense judgments of (dis)utility, animals tend to be placed along an instrumental continuum. Humans—constituted as a privileged group distinct from animals—are thus able to construct, enter, and exit physical and discursive spaces at will, engaging in a variety of relations and practices with animals based on this continuum. The two extremes of instrumentality

¹ The latter encompasses the intersection of patriarchal, colonialist, classist, and other intra-human forms of oppression with inter-species oppression. For example, children's books featuring animals began to flourish at the end of the eighteenth century, when Victorians were negotiating questions of evolution, religion, racism, and empire. Among the most famous of these, Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) comprises a series of moral tales featuring talking animals set in the Indian jungle. Kipling himself was born in British-ruled colonial India, and his stories are often interpreted as, at least in part, a celebration of British imperialism. In this sense, Cudworth develops an approach to intersecting oppression in her concept of anthroparchy: "A social system, a complex and relatively stable set of hierarchical relationships in which 'nature' is dominated through formations of social organization which privilege the human" (2011, p. 67). Cudworth argues that anthroparchy captures the interplay of the discursive and material constitution of domination—an idea that resonates with the consideration of the indissociability of discourse and practice.

are exemplified by the “friend or food” distinction: on one end, “pets,” constructed in discourses of affection and care; on the other, “food animals,” fully objectified within instrumental and calculative discourses. Accordingly, animals are positioned along one dimension of instrumentalization or objectification, counterbalanced by tendencies of positive affect and moral valorization. Yet the discourses and practices that produce these positions also operate across an intersecting dimension—relating to the sensibility or non-sensibility of animals.

A key aspect of cultural insensibility to the processes of objectification lies in the saturation of popular culture with representations of living animals that serve as repositories of sentiment and affection, while products of their (hidden) exploitation simultaneously carry affective meanings (“comfort food,” etc.). Such contradictions are ubiquitous in children’s cultural materials—cartoons, comics, books, toys, and games. For instance, the *Ladybird First Picture Dictionary* juxtaposes an image of salami being sliced (to illustrate a knife) with drawings of a koala and a kangaroo. The fact that what is being sliced are animal body parts is, of course, hidden from the toddler reader. The overall effect is to render idealized representations of animals sensible, while also making animal products sensible, despite the absence of the real animals’ experiences. For the young reader, no incongruity exists—habituation to the cultural denial of exploitation proceeds seamlessly.

Based on these two intersecting dimensions—the degree of objectification/ subjectification and the degree of sensibility/non-sensibility—Cole and Steward develop a conceptual model or map (Figure 1 below) that summarizes key features of Western culture’s discourses and practices about animals. It provides a tool for analyzing their manifestations across socialization sites such as the family, education, and mass and social media. It is “well-suited to describing and understanding the complexities of the relationship between discourses and practices, in shaping human–nonhuman animal interaction in childhood (and beyond)” (2014, pp. 15–16).

Figure 1. A conceptual map of the social construction of animals (Cole & Steward, 2014, p. 22)

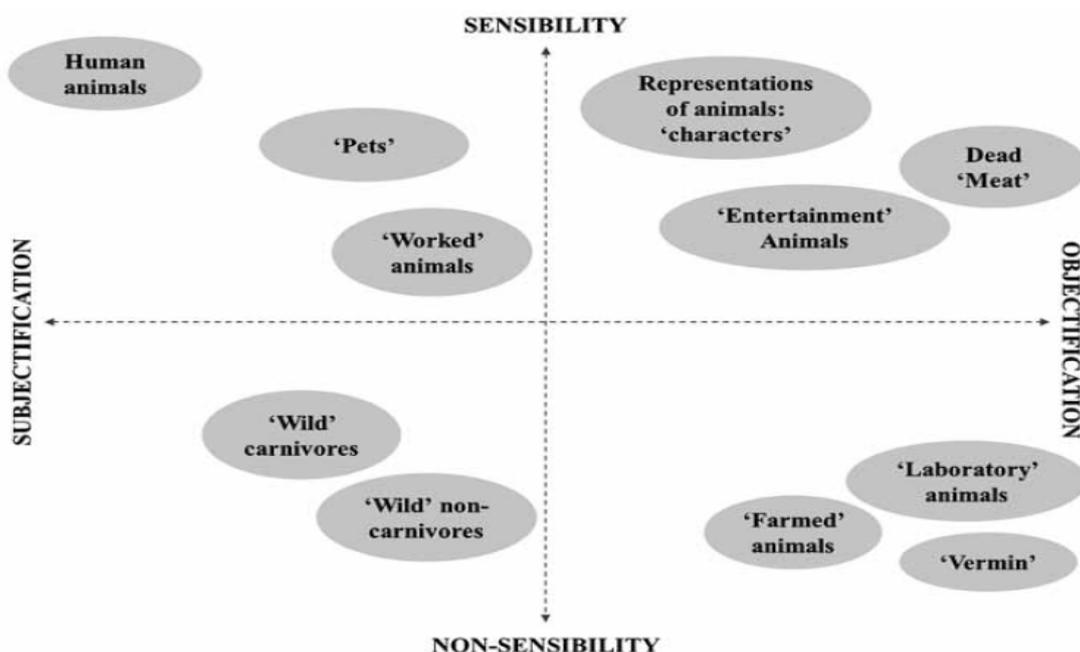


Figure 1 enables us to conceptualize how the positioning of animals is often ambivalent and subject to change through discursive modification or contestation. Rabbits, for example, occupy almost the entire map—from symbols of the promiscuity of nature as “wild” animals, to experimental “tools,” or “farmed” commodities for meat and fur; from hatched “pets,” to “entertainers” pulled from magicians’ hats, or anthropomorphized stereotypical “characters” like Bugs Bunny or Jessica Rabbit. This notion of positioning raises an important sociological question: What are humans doing when they distribute animals across such a map? To approach this, Weber’s typology of social action offers valuable insight.

Weber’s enduring preoccupation was with the meaning of human action. As he states, sociology is “a science that in construing and understanding social action seeks causal explanation of the course and effects of such action. By ‘action’ is meant human behaviour linked to a subjective meaning on the part of the actor or actors concerned” (2019, p. 78). Weber distinguishes four “ideal types” of meaningful social action: purposive-rational, value-rational, affective, and traditional. Thus, Figure 1 should not be seen as a rigid code for relating to animals internalized through a monolithic process of socialization. Rather, it represents an idealized (not “ideal” in the normatively desirable sense) model of the paradoxical human–animal relations of contemporary Western societies, which Weber’s typology helps elucidate.

Weber contended that purposive-rational action had become dominant in modernity, shaping the modern individual. This form of action disenchants and objectifies the world, rendering it predictable and manipulable. Although not part of Weber’s own analysis, this objectification clearly extends to animal life.² The calculative attitude underpinning purposive-rational action is central to the manipulation of animals in factory farms and, more broadly, across the southeastern quadrant of Figure 1. Children are socialized to reproduce such purposive-rational relations with animals—primarily as consumers of animal products. Yet, because this process is inherently violent, it requires a more subtle inculcation of discourses and practices that both deny the violence and cultivate children as caring and compassionate beings.

Weber’s second type, value-rational action, refers to behavior oriented toward intrinsic values or ultimate ends (such as “honour” or “dignity”). Within this framework, rescuing or caring for animals removed from factory farms may be considered a value-rational action. However, contemporary animal welfare discourses frequently instrumentalize such care, subordinating it to human self-interest—minimizing costs, maximizing gustatory pleasures, or reinforcing a vicarious caring identity. In this sense, welfarist discourse exemplifies Weber’s concern about the slippage from value-rational to purposive-rational action in modernity.

² “In so far [as the behavior of animals is subjectively understandable] it would be theoretically possible to formulate a sociology of the relations of men to animals, both domestic and wild. Thus, many animals ‘understand’ commands, anger, love, hostility, and react to them in ways which are evidently often by no means purely instinctive and mechanical and in some sense both consciously meaningful and affected by experience” (Weber, 1947, p. 104). Although this quote indicates that Weber appeared to be interested in including animals in sociological research, they never became a central aspect of his work.

While the first two types of social action are rational, the remaining two—*affective* and *traditional*—are deemed irrational. *Affective* action is motivated by emotion or feeling, while *traditional* action is guided by habit and custom. For Weber, these are less meaningful precisely because they are less self-reflective.

An important outcome of childhood socialization is the association of *affective* action toward animals with infancy. As children age, *affectivity* is progressively downplayed and replaced by an inculcation of *purposive-rational* attitudes—livestock transporters usurp plush animals as appropriate toys. Figure 1 illustrates how commodified representations of animals act as conduits for children’s *affectivity*, while the denial of exploitation facilitated by these representations remains highly profitable for culture industries and their fast-food partners. In this way, even *affect* may itself become instrumentalized.

In the case of *traditional* action, meaningfulness gives way to unthinking habit, which is itself readily commodified and absorbed into *purposive-rational* action. This dynamic is evident in the evocation of the timeless rural idyll of animal “*husbandry*” within children’s culture—for instance, through the reproduction of pastoral imagery in digital media. Through playing with “*farmyard*” toys, children are encouraged to (profitably) rehearse a fabricated “*tradition*” of human–animal relations that obscures the realities of industrial farming and slaughter.

Viewed through Weber’s typology, Figure 1 thus represents an interpretive key for understanding the meaning of human action toward animals. It reveals how cultural discourses and practices—rooted in ostensibly *value-rational*, *affective*, or *traditional* orientations—often conceal their underlying *purposive-rational* (instrumental) foundations. In this way, Weber’s framework illuminates the persistent incongruities of extreme violence juxtaposed with sentimental affection that characterize contemporary Western construction of animals and their reproduction through childhood socialization.

Conclusion

The idea that children can learn positive values through their relations with animals remains prominent today, as both humane organizations and the pet industry encourage parents to bring home animals to teach responsibility, kindness, and nurturing behavior. Research suggests that attachments to companion animals can foster nurturing behavior in children, and children with pets may exhibit higher levels of empathy than those without.

As Molloy observes, “studies of human–animal interaction suggest that childhood experiences of animals and particularly animal narratives contribute to the formation of attitudes toward animals in adulthood” (2011, p. 122). Within the multiple physical and social dimensions of the school environment and other socialization sites, a diversity of social representations of animals is continually produced and reproduced. These representations construct narratives about human–animal boundaries and identities and raise complex questions concerning domination and

subordination, normativity and deviance, rationality and empathy, as well as the possibilities for resistance and change.

In light of these insights, it is crucial to develop a sociology of childhood attentive to the discourses and practices that socialize children into norms of human–animal interaction. This article has argued that Foucauldian analysis of the power–knowledge nexus, combined with Weberian fourfold typology of social action, provides a framework for understanding the nuanced complexity of these categorization processes along the continuum of human–animal relations. Together, they offer lenses that make visible the constructed nature of animals and the paradox at the heart of childhood socialization—the apparent incongruities of “friend or food”, of cuddling a teddy bear while consuming a hamburger—in a culture of mixed messages about animals.

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