

Linked oppression: Connecting animal and gender attitudes

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Abstract

Ecofeminists and animal rights advocates have posited a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of animals. Although male/female comparisons regarding attitudes toward animals have frequently been considered, only limited research has focused on gender roles and animal attitudes. We therefore examined the relation between gender roles and animal attitudes with undergraduate students (260 males, 484 females) at a public university in Texas. Participants responded to an online Qualtrics survey that assessed their attitudes toward animals, gender norms, and several forms of sexism. The survey also presented participants with questions about their justifications for meat consumption. As hypothesized, pro meat-eating justifications were positively related to sexist attitudes as well as traditional gender roles and negatively related to gender role transcendent attitudes. On the other hand, pro-animal attitudes were positively correlated with gender role transcendent attitudes and negatively correlated with benevolent/hostile sexism and traditional gender attitudes. Our results empirically supported “the linked oppression thesis,” that gender and animal attitudes are connected.

Keywords

linked oppression, animal attitudes, gender role attitudes

Ecofeminists have posited that attitudes toward and treatment of both animals and women are impacted by patriarchal values that emphasize domination (Bloodhart & Swim, 2010). More specifically, the linked oppression thesis (Adams, 2000; Wyckoff, 2014) has claimed that the oppression of women and animals is connected structurally and has a shared foundation, with each reinforcing and exacerbating the other. According to the linked oppression thesis, based on claims of

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ecofeminists and animal rights advocates, “intersecting structures of power” support the “othering” and subordination of women as well as animals (Adams & Gruen, 2014).

Theoretical perspectives

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, a branch of feminism that incorporates ecological analysis, uses philosophical and political theoretical frameworks to argue that capitalist patriarchal systems contribute to the degradation and commodification of women, animals, and the environment. Ecofeminists claim that women and animals are structurally connected by the societal acceptance of exploitation and objectification of women and animals. Ecofeminists draw parallels between the view of “women as sex objects” and “animals as food” (Adams, 1991, 2010). They also equate human and nonhuman reproductive rights, comparing access to contraception and abortion rights for women to the lack of bodily autonomy of breeding animals such as cows and pigs. Ecofeminists argue that, until we are able to become more conscientious consumers and subvert the capitalistic patriarchal system, the oppression of women and animals will not be eradicated.

Linked oppression thesis

Wyckoff (2014) attempts to clarify the assertions made by ecofeminists into a central argument, which he refers to as the linked oppression thesis; this thesis addresses the objections made by opponents of ecofeminism related to conceptual or logical links. Wyckoff argues that the claims made by objectors to the linked oppression thesis misunderstand the core ideas behind the thesis. Opponents of ecofeminism argue that there are differences in the legal and social status of women and animals, which makes their experiences of marginalization different, therefore not linked. Wyckoff (2014, p. 727) responds to this claim by noting,

once it is recognized that women need not bear the burden of demonstrating that they are like men in order to be claimants of justice, the fact animals are not like humans in the way that women are like men ceases to have force as a premise.

He follows this claim with the argument that it does not logically follow that animals need to meet human standards for what counts as humanity in order for their existence and desire to not be exploited to count.

Wyckoff also posits that if the linked oppression thesis can be backed by evidence, then it should be considered notable and worth examining further. He presents three reasons for why findings in support of the linked oppression thesis would be significant. First, he claims that if the linked oppression thesis is true, then oppression of women and animals should be viewed as a united political issue instead of being seen as independent social problems.

Second, he argues that animal welfare issues are regularly disregarded by individuals who allegedly have convictions about a wide range of social justice issues that center on domination and oppression. He believes this is a problem because it prevents potential alliances from forming. Verifying the linked oppression thesis would provide evidence in support of adopting a more inclusive approach to social justice activism and advocacy. Third, Wyckoff asserts that verification of the linked oppression thesis would create awareness around the link between sexism and speciesism, which would raise awareness of the use of exploitation tactics by activists that oppresses one group for the benefit of the other, as in PETA's "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" campaign.

Wyckoff supports a causal link in terms of a shared foundation of the oppression of women and animals, with the causes of this shared foundation needing to be identified and remedied. In short, eliminating sexism and speciesism could involve eradicating the causes of the oppression, removing the "material conditions that enable the oppression" (p. 735), or revealing justifications that sustain the shared foundation of oppression. Wyckoff is ambiguous as to what exactly liberation would depend on, whether root causes would need to be eliminated or enabling conditions removed. However, he does argue that awareness of the linked oppression thesis could lead to more social and political action around the root issues that oppress women and animals. One of these issues that connects oppression of women and animals is based on our hierarchical society, involving social dominance of some groups over others.

Social dominance theory and linked oppression

Social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012) describes three classification systems, an age system, a gender system, and a third "arbitrary-set system in which socially constructed categories are hierarchically arranged" (p. 418). Moreover, the argument is made that the social hierarchies created by these systems mutually influence each other with societal allocation of resources, related myth legitimization, and group stereotypes among the forces that help maintain group-based hierarchies.

In some cases members of a dominant group may justify a superior societal standing by seeing members of other groups, such as women, as being less than fully human. Women may be considered less rational, less mature, and primarily associated with their animalistic reproductive functions; they may also be objectified, perceived primarily in terms of their bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais, Bernard, Klein, & Allen, 2013). The links among these related theoretical perspectives are considered in the next section.

Dehumanization, infra-humanization, and objectification

Among the kinds of dehumanization identified, two are especially relevant for consideration here; they are "animalistic" and "mechanistic" dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Palaldino,

2007). Being human is contrasted with being an animal in the former form while the latter makes the distinction between being human versus being an inanimate object. Infra-humanization, seeing an “othered” or outgroup as less than fully human (Gervais et al., 2013; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Leyens et al., 2007), is another distinction and may provide justification for the social dominance of one group over another.

Gervais et al. (2013) attempt to clarify and, to some extent, unify the concepts of dehumanization and objectification. The objectification of women, with a focus on their appearance, body parts, or body functions, may lead to self-objectification. This objectification denies a woman “personhood” and results in dehumanization, including a denial of uniqueness as a person as well as human characteristics such as maturity and rationality. In some cases, though, as in a couple engaging in sexual interaction, two people may objectify each other without corresponding dehumanization (Gervais et al., 2013).

One reason given for the objectification of women is terror management of the existential threat of death. Even though Hyde (2005) has presented convincing evidence for the similarity of men and women, some people believe that women and men are fundamentally different, including women having more of an “animal nature.” Women’s “animal nature,” related to sexuality and reproductive functioning, may lead to objectification and dehumanization as coping mechanisms for dealing with fears related to mortality (Goldenberg, 2013). In other words, one reason for objectification of women is the existential fear of death/mortality that may be aroused in some by women’s perceived “animal nature.”

In support of this position, Roylance, Routledge, and Balas (2017) reported that, after being exposed to reminders of their own death, participants were more likely to perceive female artificial faces as being real, compared to a control condition (contemplating physical pain) and male faces. Contemplating their own death may have led to participants’ increased existential death concerns that, at some level, may have slightly enhanced the tendency to rate a highly morphed female face as being more similar to a real woman’s face, compared to comparable male faces. Perceiving more similarity between real and morphed female faces suggests that women’s objectification may be one way to deal with the existential threat of death since objects are not mortal. Also, exploring a potential link between animal attitudes and sexism, Roylance, Abeyta, and Routledge (2016) found that individuals who perceived humans as more distinct from other animals also scored higher in both benevolent and hostile sexism. Perhaps one way to respond to mortality and the related existential fear is to distance humans from other animals and perceive women as different from men, resulting in sexist attitudes.

Mechanisms of dehumanization/infra-humanization include denial of secondary emotions (uniquely human), such as shame or pride, and minimizing cognitive capacity of the mind (Demoulin, Leyens, Paladino, Rodriguez-Torres, & Rodriguez-Perez, 2004; Leyens et al., 2007). Such mechanisms may be used to justify hegemonic attitudes/behaviors, including justifying meat-eating (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

Masculinity, femininity, and meat consumption

In Carol Adams' book, *The sexual politics of meat*, Adams (2000) claims that consuming meat is a symbol of long-held patriarchal worldviews. She makes this argument by connecting meat, power, and masculinity, giving examples of societies that are patriarchal and have an emphasis on meat consumption in their culture. During times of warfare, meat is taken from nonmilitary women and given to men in the military, with military men being seen as the "epitome of masculinity." To provide support for contemporary views related to meat and masculinity, Adams included photos in her book of animals being sexualized in advertisements to look like women and women being compared to pieces of meat.

The media perpetuates this notion of the meat and masculinity connection with its "real men eat meat" advertisements. Rogers (2008) analyzed three of these advertisements, Del Taco's "Feed the Beast," Hummer's "Tofu," and Burger King's "Manthem." Each of these ads contributes to the idea that real men eat meat by portraying vegetarianism as feminine and meat-eating as masculine. These advertisements also focus on the message of the more meat the better and that anything other than meat is "chick food"; this message is especially portrayed in the Burger King commercial.

Men's magazines also link meat to masculinity. Stibbe (2004) examined six issues of *Men's Health* and found that meat, particularly red meat, was identified in the magazine as essential to strength and fitting into the image of what it means to be an ideal man. For example, in the December issue there was a "Special Carnivore Section" entitled, "Men and Meat: There's Only One Kind of Flesh We Like Better and Even Then She'd Better Know How to Grill" (Stibbe, 2004, p. 39).

Parry (2010) explicates the potential relationship between masculinity and meat consumption by examining cooking show episodes as well as a book. According to this analysis, farm animals are feminized and concern for them is also perceived as a feminine sentiment. On the other hand, animal slaughter is primarily a masculine industry, and meat consumption is associated with power and strength.

Several psychological studies have assessed attitudes toward meat-eating and masculinity. Ruby and Heine (2011) investigated people's perceptions of hypothetical individuals who were described as choosing either omnivorous or vegetarian diets. Participants, regardless of whether they were vegetarian or omnivores, rated the individual profiled as vegetarian as less masculine than the individual profiled as an omnivore. Similarly, Rothgerber (2013) reported that masculinity was associated with higher levels of meat consumption as well as more masculine meat-eating justifications (endorsing pro-meat attitudes, denial of animal suffering, hierarchical justifications, religious justifications, and health justifications).

Conversely, feminine characteristics such as empathy may be associated with more humane treatment of animals. Erlanger and Tsytarev (2012), for example, found that empathy was related to positive animal views, discomfort with animal cruelty, and discomfort related to using animals for utilitarian purposes. Reviewing research related to animal cruelty, McPhedran (2009) suggested that a lower level of empathy is one factor related to aggression against both humans and animals.

The present study

Our purpose here is to extend this line of research linking gender attitudes and animal attitudes. In accord with Wyckoff's (2014) linked oppression thesis as well as social dominance and related theoretical approaches, we expected individuals who dehumanize and objectify women, as indicated by sexism and gender role measures, to also distinguish between animals and humans, resulting in pro meat-eating attitudes but negative pro-animal attitudes. Specifically, we hypothesized the following:

1. Pro-meat attitudes/justifications will be positively correlated with sexist attitudes and traditional gender role attitudes but negatively correlated with nontraditional gender role attitudes.
2. Pro-animal attitudes will be negatively correlated with sexist/traditional gender role attitudes and positively correlated with nontraditional gender role attitudes.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N=750$; 260 males, 484 females, six not identified) enrolled in either an introductory ethics course or a psychology of human sexuality course at a public university in Texas during the fall 2015 semester received extra credit for their participation. The majority (682, 91%) were 25 years of age or younger and also described their socioeconomic status as upper-middle, middle, or lower-middle class (703, 94%). Regarding ethnicity, 375 participants (49%) reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 219 (29%) as Hispanic, 99 (13%) as African-American, 24 (3%) as Asian, and 32 (4%) as "other."

Materials and procedures

Participants were given a month to complete a Qualtrics online survey at their convenience. The survey included demographic items, the 20-item Animal Attitudes Scale (Herzog, Betchart, & Pittman, 1991), the 27-item Meat-Eating Justification Scale (Rothgerber, 2013), the 13-item Social Roles Inventory Questionnaire (Baber & Tucker, 2006), and the 12-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Whitehead, 2010). In order to maintain consistency, all items were rated using a five-point Likert Scale, which ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

The 20-item Animal Attitudes Scale (Herzog et al., 1991) assessed participants' attitudes regarding the use of animals. Eleven items used reverse wording ("I think people who object to raising animals for meat are too sentimental"); the other nine items were pro-animal statements ("Much of the scientific research done with animals is unnecessary and cruel"). The 27-item Meat-Eating Justification Scale

(Rothgerber, 2013) included nine subscales, consisting of three items each, that assessed strategies for justifying meat consumption. The subscales were as follows: pro-meat attitude (“I enjoy eating meat too much to ever give it up”), denial (“Animals don’t really suffer when being raised and killed for meat”), hierarchical justification (“It’s acceptable to eat certain animals because they’re bred for that purpose”), dichotomization (“To me, there is a real difference between animals we keep as pets and animals we eat as food”), dissociation (“When I look at meat, I try hard not to connect it with an animal”), religious justification (“God intended us to eat animals”), avoidance (“I try not to think about what goes on in slaughterhouses”), health justification (“Meat is essential for strong muscles”), and human destiny/fate justification (“It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that scientists believe the human body has evolved to eat meat”).

The 13-item Social Roles Questionnaire (Baber & Tucker, 2006) assessed gender transcendent attitudes with five items (“People should be treated the same regardless of their sex”) as well as gender-linked attitudes with eight items (“Only some kinds of work are appropriate for both men and women”). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory short form (Glick & Whitehead, 2010) included six items measuring hostile sexist attitudes toward women (“When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against”) and six items measuring benevolent sexist attitudes toward women (“Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives”).

Descriptive information for the measures is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive information for scales.

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Animal attitudes	65.31	11.69	0.89
Pro-meat justification	9.47	3.02	0.83
Denial justification	6.71	2.29	0.67
Hierarchical justification	9.04	2.64	0.77
Dichotomization justification	10.92	2.41	0.5
Dissociation justification	9.95	2.9	0.79
Religious justification	9.58	2.78	0.85
Avoidance justification	10.76	2.62	0.66
Health justification	9.49	3.1	0.87
Human destiny/fate justification	9.53	2.17	0.57
Benevolence sexism	18.91	4.5	0.78
Hostile sexism	17.17	4.75	0.81
Gender linked	21.14	5.67	0.82
Gender transcendence	21.31	3.06	0.78

Table 2. Correlations among animal attitudes, meat-eating justifications, gender role, and sexism measures.

	BS	HS	GL	GT
AA	-.30*	-.39*	-.37*	.33*
PMJ	.34*	.38*	.36*	-.18*
DJ	.27*	.28*	.29*	-.27*
HJ	.39*	.36*	.39*	-.23*
DichJ	.37*	.29*	.26*	-0.03
DissJ	.22*	0.06	0.03	.13*
RJ	.42*	.38*	.35*	-.19*
AJ	.21*	0.03	0.03	.12*
HeaJ	.45*	.40*	.41*	-.18*
DFJ	.43*	.43*	.41*	-.17*

AA: Animal Attitudes Scale; AJ: avoidance justification; BS: benevolent sexism; DFJ: destiny/fate justification; DichJ: dichotomy justification; DissJ: dissociation justification; DJ: denial justification; GL: Gender Linked Scale; GT: Gender Transcendent Scale; HeaJ: health justification; HJ: hierarchical justification; HS: hostile sexism; PMJ: pro-meat justification; RJ: religious justification.

* $p < .001$.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we performed Pearson correlations (see Table 2) among animal attitudes, meat-eating justifications, gender role, and sexism measures. Of the 40 correlations reported, 35 of these were significant at the .001 level.

In support of the first hypothesis, benevolent and hostile sexism as well as traditional gender role attitudes were positively correlated with pro-meat-eating attitudes, denial of animal suffering, hierarchical dichotomization, religious, health, and destiny/fate justifications for eating meat. Gender transcendence had corresponding negative correlations for pro-meat-eating attitudes, denial of animal suffering, and other related justifications.

Related to the second hypothesis, gender transcendence was significantly positively correlated with pro-animal attitudes (Animal Attitude Scale) and with use of avoidance and dissociation as meat-eating justifications. Sexist and traditional gender role attitudes were significantly negatively correlated with pro-animal attitudes.

Discussion

Overall our results support ecofeminists' contention that, in our male-dominated, masculine-oriented society, hegemonic attitudes toward women and animals are

related to each other. As predicted by our first hypothesis, sexist and traditional gender role attitudes positively correlated with pro meat-eating attitudes/justifications while nontraditional, gender transcendent attitudes correlated negatively with pro meat-eating attitudes. In support of the second hypothesis, gender transcendent attitudes were positively related to pro-animal attitudes while sexist/traditional gender attitudes related negatively to pro-animal attitudes. Those individuals who regard women as different from/subordinate to men are also more likely to view animals as subordinate to humans, as expected from the ecofeminist perspective (Adams, 2000; Bloodhart & Swim, 2010; Wyckoff, 2014); social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012); as well as infra-humanization, objectification, and terror management perspectives (Gervais et al., 2013; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Roylance et al., 2016).

The correlations between benevolent sexism and the meat-eating justifications, all of which were significant, are of particular interest. Glick and Fiske (2001) provide data for linking hostile and benevolent sexism, tying them to gender inequality cross-nationally. Perhaps the correlations here are reflective of a protective, paternalistic, "father-knows-best" attitude toward both women and animals. However, although most of the correlations between benevolent sexism and attitudes toward animals/meat-eating parallel those of hostile sexism and gender-linked attitudes, two of the correlations, those with dissociative and avoidance justifications, did not follow this pattern. Perhaps these data suggest distinctions related to benevolent sexism, putting women on a pedestal, not yet explored. Benevolent sexism, like hostile sexism, assumes traditional gender roles and hence limits the perception of women's capabilities. However, at least on the surface benevolent sexism also views women in a more positive, sympathetic light, worthy of special treatment. Similarly, this sympathetic attitude toward women may be congruent with a more positive, empathic approach toward animals, resulting in small, positive correlations between benevolent sexism and using dissociative/avoidance justifications.

Research limitations

Limitations of the current study include its correlational design and sample consisting of college students from one Texas campus. College students represent a relatively small percentage of the population and are typically WEIRD (Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), consisting of individuals who are atypical of the world's population since they are largely white, educated, comparatively rich, and from an industrialized, democratic country. Also worth noting is the predominance of women in our sample and the large sample size which facilitated statistical power and significant findings.

The correlations we found here likely apply to similar samples. Individuals from westernized countries could be expected to have attitudes that link sexism and meat-eating. However, more research is necessary to explore whether the correlations reported here would be found for samples from more diverse cultures, such as individuals from areas of India where Hinduism is prominent.

If correlations between oppression of women and animals are only found in more western cultures, these results could impact the linked oppression thesis since Wyckoff (2014) has argued that eradicating one is tied to the other, based on finding enabling conditions/root causes of both. If sexism can exist without corresponding oppressive attitudes toward animals, this could call into question the assumptions of the linked oppression thesis. To further explore the possible cultural contexts for the linked oppression thesis, we recommend considering measures of social dominance as well as political and religious attitudes in future research.

Feminist theory and treatment of animals: Future directions

How should feminists regard the treatment of animals? Related to animalistic dehumanization, some feminists may be sensitive to suggestions that humans (women in particular) and animals should be regarded on a continuum. Since animalistic dehumanization may be used to justify differential treatment of women, this concern is understandable. However, animals and women alike suffer from the “relations of power that intersect gender and species” (Twine, 2010, p. 400).

Human–animal studies confront speciesism and the right of humans to dominate other animals (Potts, 2010). Birke (2010) urges feminists to more deeply consider the complexities of human–animal interactions, including treatment of laboratory animals that results in objectification and denial of agency. Vegan sexuality, having sexual interactions only with other vegans, is one way to confront heteronormative masculinity impacting women and animals (Potts & Parry, 2010).

Complicating this issue is our evolution as humans to be omnivores; we have evolved to eat meat as well as plants. Items from the health justification scale (“We need meat for a healthy diet”) as well as the destiny/fate justification scale (“It violates human destiny and evolution”) included here may reflect this evolutionary perspective related to meat-eating. Evolution is an ultimate cause of meat-eating, based on many generations of humans adapting behavior to a changing environment in order to promote survival (Mayr, 1982; Vega, 2001). However, this does not constitute a rationale for the “goodness” of a behavior or negate more proximal factors influencing meat-eating, such as exposure to inhumane treatment of animals raised for human consumption. The complex interplay of genetic and cultural influences, as well as human malleability, is now being recognized (Garcia & Heywood, 2016). As ecofeminists consider the inextricable interactions of genetic inheritance and social and cultural factors, analyses of ethical questions related to social dominance hierarchies and human nature can be more richly explored.

Conclusions

Our findings are at the forefront of research empirically linking attitudes toward sexism and speciesism. As Wyckoff (2014) suggested, gendered attitudes and animal

attitudes are linked, possibly resulting from a hegemonic, male-dominated society. Ecofeminists have become more aware of and are more concerned with prejudicial attitudes toward other species. Does belonging to a different species justify the hierarchical attitudes toward and subordination of animals? Along with arguing that gender does not provide justification for a privileged status, ecofeminists are also addressing the issue of a privileged species, asserting that being human does not justify maltreatment of animals, supporting a more inclusive method of engaging in social justice advocacy and activism.

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