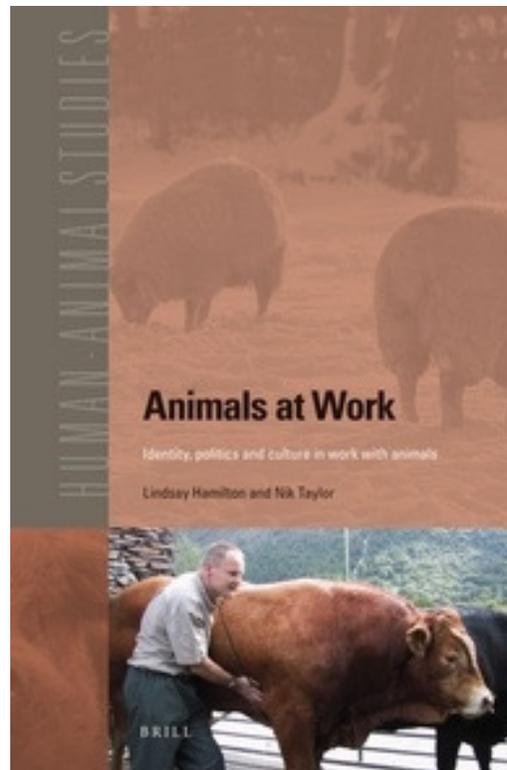


Reviews

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Working Identities

Lindsay Hamilton and Nik Taylor, *Animals at Work. Identity, politics, and culture in work with animals*. Leiden: Brill, 2013, xiv, 196 pp. €104.00; \$133.00 (pb).



Lindsay Hamilton's and Nik Taylor's book, *Animals at Work. Identity, politics, and culture in work with animals* analyzes the relationship between animals and humans in diverse situations: in veterinary surgeries, in slaughterhouses, on farms, in the wilderness, and in animal shelters. It is particularly concerned with the process of identity formation in the course of interaction with animals. The common denominator among these experiences is that they represent situations in which engagement with

animals constitutes work, even if it does not necessarily come with monetary rewards.

The book is based on ethnographic research, and the authors also attempt to contextualize their empirical observations within theoretical literature.

Placing the performing, staging, and managing of identity at the center of their analysis, the authors put forward and continuously restate the argument that identities are never fixed and static, but are rather always in flux and intermittent. It is specifically the contextual and performative nature of identities on which they focus their attention. This point of departure, that life itself is messy and mobile and no clean lines of demarcations exists between humans and animals in practice, is hardly a counter-intuitive one. This does not mean, however, that it cannot prove a useful and productive point of departure for adding novel perspectives to the problem of human-animal interactions, which it definitely does.

The book is structured around eight chapters, three of which contain theoretical reflections on human-animal interactions, while five others are comprised of fieldwork-based, ethnographic study. The theoretical ruminations draw on analytical frameworks employed in the fields of Human-Animal Studies, Cultural Studies, and lastly, Organization and Network Theory. The latter fields reflect the authors' own backgrounds in sociology and management, and they represent innovative theoretical lenses which have hitherto rarely been exploited in the study of the subject.

The first analytical chapter, "Farm animals, vets and the transformation of 'muck,'" studies how farm-animal veterinarians, in spite of the omnipresence of filth and dirt in their working lives, manage to keep themselves professionally "clean" as surgeons. It reveals that "muck" is a cultural and professional resource, the sign of "real work," which provides a focus for the shared values and collective identity of the profession. At the same time, vets have developed various strategies which allow them to

insert a sense of distance between themselves and their patients, and this allows them to remain unpolluted by the animal mess.

The chapter “Slaughter workers and the making of meat” takes its motto from Upton Sinclair’s famous book, *The Jungle*: “They use everything about the hog except the squeal” — and this serves as a reminder that the production of meat in slaughterhouses stands as a powerful metaphor for soulless, mechanized production and the lack of humanity. The slaughterhouse is fundamentally different from any other factory because it turns living beings into dead on an enormous scale. The chapter shows how the violence necessary for killing becomes normalized by the creation of a degree of distance with the help of language, for example when “dead chickens” are referred to as “whole-bird products.” Typically, the bureaucratically organized process of animal death is hidden from the public eye, which constitutes another form of distancing. Moreover, the killing is organized and rationalized in such a way that no specific person is “really” responsible for the act of killing. The chapter also points out that the violence experienced in the slaughterhouse has an impact on the everyday, non-working life of its workers. Also, the rates of violent crimes appear to be higher in communities where slaughterhouses are located (although there exists no clear-cut evidence of the casual relationship).

The chapter “Shelter Workers and the Construction of ‘Animal Personhood’” focuses on a very different site, and is based on data gathered in the course of three years in two animal shelters caring mainly for dogs. It focuses on the creation of “personhood” for animals, whereby unwanted, “rejected” animals become redefined as “pets-in-waiting” as the shelter workers seek to find a caring home for them. It shows that the performance of care has a community-building effect, while the animals themselves act as resources for the resolution of conflicts between the disparate factions of the shelter workers.

The chapter “Wildlife presenters, performance and the animal ‘actor’” deals with a professional group that enjoys a privileged status which comes with opportunities to visit exotic places, play with orangutans, and swim with dolphins. It shows that the unpredictability of animal behavior in the wilderness makes an impact on the presenters’ work. In broader terms, the authors conclude that in the course of film-making agency is exercised not simply by humans, but also by animals; although it is of course impossible to find out about the feelings of animals in the same way it is possible for humans. The chapter is also concerned with the process of “viewer commodification,” whereby storylines are manufactured in such a way that they confirm to certain pre-existing agendas and expectations of the audience. Emotional aspects are also taken into account, for example the role of the “cuteness factor,” one example of which is the presentation of young primates as if they were human babies.

The last empirical chapter, “Small animal vets and the crafting of intimacy,” is based on fieldwork conducted in veterinary surgeries in the UK and Australia, and looks at the relationship between animals, their owners, and veterinarians. It emphasizes the necessity of interlocution by the human guardians who translate the symptoms of the animal in a meaningful way to the vet. It also points to the increasing feminization of small animal veterinary profession. While the treatment of food-producing animals like cattle and pigs represent the “serious” side of the veterinary business and continues to be dominated by male veterinarians, small animal veterinary work has become associated with caring rather than scientific work, and as such is considered the typical domain of female professionals.

The authors’ overall claim that the identities of humans and other animals are constructed in “messy and multiple ways” and its emphasis on the “complicated and complex relations” between humans and animals is entirely justified. Nevertheless, throughout the book’s pages these arguments become repeated so frequently that they nearly lose their

explanatory power. This blemish does not, however, diminish the virtue of this work, namely that with the help of the ethnographic method the authors succeed in offering an interesting insight into human-animal relationships at the micro-level. Particularly refreshing are the instances which reveal how animals are drawn into proximity with or are distanced from humans, sometimes even simultaneously. The book also calls attention to (though does not elaborate on) the necessity to study a wider repertoire of roles and performances, not just the professional aspects of animal-related workers: this includes their roles as spouses, parents, or contributors to their local community. Another welcome aspect is that the book diversifies the heterogeneous images of professionals dealing with animals by introducing a gender dimension to the discussion.

In the theoretical realm the book raises numerous questions and concerns. Definitive answers are not provided; it is true, however, that the authors state at the outset of the book that offering “solutions” was not within the remit of their work. In light of the book’s focus on the Anglo-Saxon world, the question arises if its conclusions would also apply, and if so to what extent, to societies, environments and cultures with norms and values different from those in the “Western world.” That question may constitute a vantage point for further research.