

Critical commentary

Moving beyond anthropocentrism in leisure research: Multispecies perspectives

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Abstract

This commentary challenges the anthropocentrism of leisure research and raises some of the limitations of considering leisure solely from human-centric perspectives. Research from the emerging subfield of human-horse relationships is used to illustrate how more-than-human analyses can enrich understandings of leisure as multispecies practices, encounters and interactions. Embracing multispecies perspectives may open up new and challenging ethical, theoretical, methodological and practical issues for the field of leisure studies.

Keywords: animals; anthropocentrism; horses; leisure; multispecies

The anthropocentrism of leisure studies

There has been much debate in the field of leisure studies about what 'leisure' actually is. For Stebbins (2005), leisure entails choice and satisfaction, albeit within the constraints of social, cultural, economic and personal circumstances. He defines leisure as "uncoerced activity undertaken during free time where such activity is something people want to do" (Stebbins, 2005: 350). Rojek (1997) has traced changes in leisure theory, while Snape et al (2017) discuss how leisure is seen primarily as the antithesis of work. Carr (2017) focuses on debates about the importance of freedom to constructions of leisure. Whilst acknowledging that some leisure can indeed be understood in terms of freedom and enlightenment, Carr (2017: 142) argues that much of what we commonly refer to as leisure can be better understood as "a form of consumerist recreation", so shaped is it by commercial interests and external constraints. These and other discussions point to the contested nature of leisure, which, although widely accepted as an important facet of human existence, is not experienced without constraint and often is not equally available to all (Crawford et al., 1991; Sayer, 2005; Burk et al., 2015; Andrade et al., 2017). However, although leisure researchers have focused critical attention on leisure as a legitimate field of academic inquiry, and as bound up in processes of power and inequality, and have questioned what leisure is and if and how it can be understood as integral to other practices such as work, these discussions remain firmly anthropocentric, focused almost entirely on human interests, practices and interactions. In this critical commentary I question the appropriateness of this

anthropocentric focus, and consider what more-than-human perspectives could add to the field of leisure studies.

The anthropocentrism of leisure studies may appear justified, and is rarely questioned. After all, when Stebbins (2005) speaks of agency and choice, it is of course human agency and choice to which he refers. However, researchers from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds have disputed the notion that agency is a solely human phenomenon (Cooke, 2011; Carter & Charlies, 2013; Pearson, 2013; Shaw, 2013). Shapiro's (2006) proposition that agency is better thought of as a continuum, along which all animals – human and nonhuman – sit, resonates with the experiences of those humans who regularly interact with nonhuman animals. Nonhumans can make choices, they can exercise agency in their actions and interactions, although this agency may differ to that which we readily ascribe to and recognise in humans. Consequently, nonhuman animals should not be excluded from ideas of leisure on the grounds of inability to exercise some degree of agency. Snape et al. (2017) suggest that leisure is usually defined in opposition to work, so is work a solely human phenomenon? Again, many researchers suggest it is not. A variety of nonhuman animals perform work, even if they do not fully understand the capitalist wage-effort bargain into which they are entered with their human owners/caretakers (Coulter, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). The donkey labouring in India's traditional brick kilns, and the guide dog assisting a partially sighted human to live independently are certainly 'working' (Brooke, n.d.; Sanders, 1999). Whether their time when not actively labouring in the service of humans can be defined as 'leisure' time is more debatable, and varies widely depending on the status of the working animal, the society and culture in which he or she is embedded, and the economic situation and resource availability of that context. However, this applies to humans as well, and not all humans are able to engage in leisure and have access to free time in ways that privileged western societies often take for granted. So it seems inappropriate to exclude all nonhuman animals from concepts of leisure based on work/leisure binary oppositions. Can Carr's (2017) suggestion that concepts of leisure be split between those aimed at inner freedom, on the one hand, and 'consumerist recreation', on the other, be extended to nonhumans? Certainly nonhuman animals are enmeshed in many activities that could be usefully understood as consumerist recreation, from dog agility to breeding shows and sport competitions (Gillespie et al., 2002; Dashper, 2016). Again the animals involved may be unaware of the consumerist aspects of those activities, or the goals, aspirations, rules and regulations of the human participants, but this does not mean that animals are not part of these leisure experiences (Carr, 2014). Equally, although freedom is a human-defined concept, human leisure participants frequently explain their interspecies encounters with nonhumans, such as horses, in terms of freedom, enlightenment and transcendence; experiences which the human partner believes are shared, at least to some extent, by their nonhuman companion (Cochrane & Dashper, 2015). So again it seems inappropriate to exclude all nonhumans from concepts of leisure in relation to notions of freedom. This short discussion, while barely scratching the surface of many complex practical, theoretical and philosophical issues that warrant much deeper consideration, does indicate that concepts of leisure may indeed be extendable and applicable to at least some nonhuman others, in some circumstances.

The field of human-animal studies argues for the importance of moving beyond anthropocentric understandings and recognising that we live in a multispecies world, one in which all species, human and nonhuman, co-exist, interact, and "generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches" (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010: 546). Many practices of leisure can be considered multispecies. For many humans, nonhuman animals are integral to their treasured leisure activities. For lots of people, time spent relaxing at home can involve other animals, most commonly but not only cats and dogs, and both empirical research and personal interactions with individual nonhuman animals (pets) tell us that the enjoyment gained from these interactions is not experienced solely by the human actor (Sanders, 1999;

Charles & Davies, 2008). Nonhuman animals are involved in human leisure, and also demonstrate relaxation and preference for activities which could be defined as their own leisure, such as the dog playing with a stick, or horses engaged in mutual grooming in a field. Leisure is thus not a solely human phenomenon, and to take a wholly anthropocentric approach to leisure research risks limiting the field and our understandings of this complex practice.

Other than dogs, the species of nonhuman animal most commonly and intimately involved in a variety of human leisure experiences is the horse. In the remainder of this short paper I consider some ways in which the burgeoning subfield of human-horse relationships can contribute to challenging the anthropocentrism of leisure studies, and suggest ways in which these insights can be developed to enhance understandings of leisure in multispecies worlds.

Horses in leisure, horses as leisure

Horses have long played an important role in human societies, being integral to agricultural development, warfare and transport. Horses have also long been partners in human leisure, from the chariot races of ancient Rome to contemporary forms of equestrian sport (Clutton-Brock, 1992). However, the twentieth century saw a rapid change in the role of the horse, from being primarily a 'beast of burden' to one more involved with sport and recreation (Crossman & Walsh, 2011). This has led to changes in the types and breeds of horses preferred for different activities, and has altered human-horse relationships (Rossdale, 1999). Horses are now involved in a wide variety of human leisure activities, from competitive sport, to trail riding, tourism and therapy (Burgon, 2003; Gilbert & Gillett, 2012; Davis et al., 2013; Buchmann, 2017).

Involving another species in our leisure raises many practical and ethical issues. As Stebbins (2005) argues, one key aspect of leisure is the idea of consent – leisure is an activity entered into freely and without coercion. Can we say that horses take part in our leisure without coercion? The simple answer would be no, as horses do not usually have opportunity to choose whether or not they are ridden, or what activities they are trained for, or to participate in a given event. Horses do not understand the rules of equestrian sport, for example, and so they cannot give consent to take part in the same way that humans can (Jönsson, 2012). Additionally, even if they did understand, horses are not free to choose in the way that humans are, as horses are 'owned' by their human caretakers, and so subject to human whim, vulnerable to be sold on if they do not meet expectations (Dashper, 2014, 2017a). On these grounds horses cannot be said to be enjoying leisure when they participate in leisure activities as dictated by their human caretakers. They may be involved in leisure, but it is leisure for the human and not for the horse. This draws attention to an important question within leisure research: whose leisure are we talking about? The example of horses involved in human leisure highlights that leisure for one individual may not be leisure for another. This is also the case in many human-only leisure activities, where the leisure of one participant is facilitated by the work (paid or unpaid) of others, from family members, to coaches, to cleaners, to those labouring to produce cheap sportswear, and many more. Considering the role of nonhumans, in this case horses, in some human's leisure makes this dynamic more apparent, and underscores the importance of defining whose leisure we are focusing on within our research, and who has to labour to enable that leisure.

But leisure/work coerced/non-coerced binaries are not that simple, even within human-horse relationships. Horses may not be able to give informed consent to their involvement, or to understand all the rules of engagement in different activities, and are vulnerable to human wishes as 'property', but the human-horse relationship is more complex than a master-slave dynamic suggests. Horses are large, powerful animals, and humans take a risk in even handling them from the ground, let alone sitting on their backs and asking them to perform complex activities. Riding is a high risk activity, and serious accidents can and do happen, but most human-horse encounters do not result in harm and revolve instead around high levels of interspecies trust and nuanced communication (Gilbert, 2014; Thompson & Nesci, 2016). Research in the field of human-horse relationships stresses the importance of working together across species boundaries, employing the language of partnership over that of force and coercion (Wipper, 2000; Game, 2001; Brandt, 2004; Maurstad et al., 2013; Dashper, 2017a). It is far easier and safer to work with a willing horse, to learn a shared language of interspecies communication and collaboration, than to try to force half a ton of highly reactive, often flighty animal, to do something against their will (Keaveney, 2008). As another living creature, horses are capable of forming bonds with people, of expressing likes and dislikes, and have changing moods (Dashper, 2017b). Birke and Hockenhull's (2015) research illustrates that horses 'pay attention' to known handlers more closely than to unknown ones, suggesting the importance of a bond, created over time and routine interaction, in the formation of effective and collaborative human-horse interactions. This suggests that whilst horses may not be involved in leisure with humans on the same terms as the human partner, they can and do exercise some agency in their interactions with humans in leisure spaces, although this agency may differ to that exercised by the human partner. Horses are not passive participants in human leisure; they shape those leisure encounters through their actions and reactions, bringing their own personalities and experiences to the encounter, and forming bonds with some humans and not others. Therefore the role of nonhuman animals, like horses, in leisure cannot be compared to other nonhuman aspects of leisure experiences, like bikes or boats. As another living creature with a distinct personality, moods, preferences and life experiences, horses bring their distinctiveness to the leisure encounter. One horse is not the same as another horse, and the same horse may be different on different days, and in interaction with different humans, and in different leisure spaces and activities. This variation and unpredictability makes leisure with another living creature exciting, enjoyable and rewarding for the human participant (Dashper, 2017b).

Horses are involved in leisure, even if this involvement is largely on human-defined terms. In my own research one of the most compelling findings from discussions with nearly 100 horse riders is that it is the relationship riders form with specific horses that makes human-horse leisure special and attracts dedication and the investment of significant resources of time, money and emotion (Dashper, 2017a, 2017b). Leisure is important for humans for many reasons, and can often be a chance to relax and socialise, and for those involved in multispecies leisure, with horses, this socialising can also involve interspecies communication, enjoying time being with another creature, even when that other cannot communicate through human verbal language. Taking a multispecies perspective to leisure, and focusing on interactions between humans and horses, highlights the importance of all forms of communication to leisure enjoyment. Although horse riders cannot engage in a two-way conversation with their horse about the pressures and stresses of their lives, they can communicate with the horse in a deeply embodied way, engaging in forms of non-verbal communication and collaboration, and seeking and receiving feedback and support that transgresses human language (Dashper, 2017b). Recognising that nonhumans can and do play important roles in leisure, and in making our human leisure lives richer, requires focusing on the embodied, nonverbal aspects of leisure which can be integral to our experiences of enjoyment, fulfillment and, perhaps, freedom in the pure sense envisaged by Carr (2017).

More than human leisure perspectives

The short discussion offered in this commentary highlights some advantages of moving beyond the anthropocentrism of much leisure research and recognising and embracing the multispecies aspects of leisure experiences and spaces. Leisure is not a solely human phenomenon, and much of what we enjoy in our leisure involves nonhuman others to some degree. To fully recognise this, and to try to understand the complex entanglements and interactions that constitute these multispecies encounters, will require rethinking of some aspects of leisure theory to consider nonhumans as actors in encounters, although they may be different types of actors with different forms and degrees of agency than the humans we are more used to conducting our research with. This will require flexibility in methods to try to capture some of the messy interactions, encounters and relationships that comprise these multispecies formations, and the practice of multispecies ethnography may be suited to this task (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Recognising the important role of nonhumans in our leisure will require facing some ethical ambiguities and uncomfortable questions about our relationships with other creatures, as well as our inherent speciesism that assumes that humans are the most important creatures on the planet, and that human needs and wants – including leisure – should take precedence over the needs and wants of other beings (Singer, 2009; Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014). These are challenging tasks, and will require flexibility and creativity in our theoretical, methodological and practical approaches to leisure, but the field of leisure studies may well be richer for it.

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