The distance between us

Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart on how society 'helps' us to rationalise the exploitation of other animals, giving us a 'licence to harm'

Many of us express compassion and concern for other animals alongside complicity in their exploitation. Researchers can examine how the mass media allow us to sustain care towards other animals while making it more difficult to know about, and act upon, the realities of the harms inflicted on them.

Our own interest in the paradox of animal care/exploitation arose from observing the puzzling phenomenon of children's fast food meals that juxtapose animal products – such as burgers or chicken nuggets – with toy representations of animal characters from Hollywood films such as *The Lion King* or *Babe* (Stewart & Cole, 2009). The fictional characters, we argue, act as lightning rods for children's empathy and affection, but simultaneously distract attention and concern from the real animals whose bodies are served up in the meal.

Through these kinds of cultural experiences, children are habituated to concurrently hold positive self-concepts of caring for and about other animals (in the form of a much-loved toy/character), at the very moment of consuming them. As we pursued this line of research, we were quickly overwhelmed by myriad examples of this paradox in Western children's culture (Cole & Stewart, 2014). From food packaging, to animal-themed clothing designs, toys, digital and online gaming, throughout the mass media and even in the formal education system, the same themes recurred: children are encouraged to cultivate affectionate, caring relationships with representations of other animals, while simultaneously being encouraged to consume real, exploited animals.

Keeping our distance

This socialisation process has a clear trajectory: as children grow up, our research shows that they are encouraged to increasingly distance themselves from other animals and to perceive humans as radically different and superior. Debra Merskin calls this 'a reification of dis-identification with animals' (2018, p.73).

We saw this process plainly laid out in the famous toy shop Hamleys, in London (Cole & Stewart, 2014). The store is populated with hundreds of toys that represent other animals, but their character changes radically according to the target age group. Toys on the ground floor are aimed at infants, and then at progressively older children on each higher floor, ending with toys designed for tweens or early teens.

On the ground floor, stuffed toys predominate, with anthropomorphised animals posed so as to invite cuddles, often with human-like smiles and wide-eyed adoring expressions. These representations give way to more realistic hard plastic 'farmyard' animals higher up in the store. The transition models a shift from affection to objectification that is a hallmark of 'growing up', culminating in the objectification of real animals on the top floor. Here, sweets containing gelatine and other animal products are on sale, but there is nothing in the shop that might raise children's awareness that real animals are exploited and killed to produce them.

Hamleys is a microcosm of a more general process. In *Seeing Species*, Merskin (2018) examines how the media distance us from other animals. She argues that we are deceived as to our proximity to, and knowledge about, other animals – while they appear to be 'everywhere', their cultural representations are 'often distorted and far removed from true visibility' (2018, p.45). By contrast, media depictions of the real experiences of 'farmed' animals are rare (Freeman, 2009).

Among the most dramatic cultural distortions are 'suicide food' – caricatures of cows, pigs, chickens or other 'food animals' represented as inviting their own consumption (Presser, 2013). These often feature in butcher shop windows or on restaurant signage or menus. A moment's thought highlights the absurdity of other animals enjoying the prospect of their own destruction for human pleasure. But, the ubiquity of these kinds of representations highlights the extent of cultural estrangement from real exploited animals, who are anything but suicidal.

Merskin goes on to argue that children growing up in urban environments are increasingly distanced from other animals. Direct experiences with free-living animals in natural settings are becoming rare. Instead, direct experiences tend to be mediated, for instance in zoos or with companion animals: 'relationships in which the animals are often bred to be highly interactive, and even dependent on us' (2018, p.71). These mediated experiences instantiate distance between humans and nonhuman others, a distance which is exacerbated by 'distorted' media representations.

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"If nonhuman animals are perceived as inferior, that seems to legitimate their exploitation"

Soothing the paradox

Given the scope and consistency of the socialisation of the care/exploitation paradox, it is unsurprising, but nonetheless instructive, that recent psychological research has illuminated how it plays out at the level of individual attitudes and behaviour. Focusing on the consumption of other animals as one example of exploitation, Loughnan et al. (2014) describe a 'meat paradox': 'Most people care about animals and do not want to see them harmed but engage in a diet that requires them to be killed and, usually, to suffer' (2014, p.104). Loughnan et al. summarise recent research by arguing that the 'meat paradox' is resolved, or at least held in abeyance, by perceived differences between humans and other animals. If nonhuman animals are perceived as inferior, that seems to legitimate their exploitation, especially for individuals who endorse hierarchical inequalities in general terms. For example, they argue that 'people who accept or endorse domination and inequality eat meat eagerly' and that, 'simply being categorized as food undermines an animal's perceived mind' (2014, p.105). The attribution of relative mindlessness together with belief in dissimilarity between (superior) humans and (inferior) other animals, soothes the meat paradox.

Loughnan et al.'s findings suggest that eating other animals is strongly related with holding power over them, which Lois Presser (2013) has interpreted as a 'licence to harm'. For Presser, the puzzle that Loughnan et al. label the 'meat paradox' is contained within a broader 'power paradox'. Her research suggests that the licence to harm that derives from feelings of human superiority sits alongside feelings of powerlessness when it comes to eating other animals. Presser interviewed meat-eating

participants who expressed being unable to avoid eating meat, either because it was human destiny: 'We are carnivores; that's our nature' (2013, p.57), or because the body and its desire for meat was irresistible: 'I can't help it' (2013, p.59). The 'powerless' side of Presser's power paradox is further in evidence in recent psychological research – see Jared Piazza's piece in this special collection on the '4Ns' – that omnivores consider eating other animals 'natural, normal, necessary, and nice' (Piazza et al., 2015, p.117). Endorsement of the 4Ns is correlated with a greater likelihood to 'dementalise' or objectify other animals, and fewer nonhuman species being afforded moral concern.

The 4N rationalisations do not emerge from a cultural vacuum. Our research and that of other social scientists such as Merskin reveal how rationalisations such as the 4Ns circulate through the media. To take one example, *The Lion King* film is famous for its song 'Circle of Life'. The circle of life is also a crucial ideological message in the film: Simba's father Mufasa legitimates 'meat-eating' for the young lion, and vicariously for the young audience, with reference to it as a natural inevitability, soothing Simba's momentary disquiet with eating other animals:

> Simba: Dad, don't we eat the antelope?
> Mufasa: Yes Simba but let me explain. When we die our bodies become grass, and the antelope eat the grass, and so we are all connected in the great circle of life.

As food chain 'kings', fictional lions and human audiences receive their licence to harm from Mufasa at the same time as being powerless in the face of their naturalised destiny to eat other animals (Stewart & Cole, 2009). The extent to which media messages can seep into everyday discourse is suggested by one of Presser's participants, who, perhaps unconsciously, justified her own meat-eating with reference to *The Lion King*'s ideology: 'The circle of life constitutes that some animals are bred to be nourishment' (cited in Presser, 2013, p.57).

Towards a revolution

So what about the alternative resolution of the power paradox: to avoid harming other animals, as far as possible, by embracing a vegan lifestyle? Piazza et al. (2015) make an important point when they argue that the legitimacy of the 4Ns tend to go unchallenged. The lack of visibility of the real experiences of exploited nonhuman animals is one aspect of that lack of challenge (even in *The Lion King*, no animals are killed 'on screen'). Another is the exclusion or misrepresentation of the vegan challenge to that legitimacy. For example, research on the representation of veganism in the UK print media (Cole & Morgan, 2011) showed that vegans and veganism tend to be undermined through overwhelmingly negative coverage. That negativity may be interpreted as an inverse of the 4Ns: it frequently takes the form of ridiculing veganism (the opposite of 'normal'), stereotyping veganism as practically impossible (the opposite of 'natural'), dismissing veganism as a passing fad (the opposite of 'necessary'), and stereotyping vegan food as unpleasant (the opposite of 'nice'). In this context of largely anti-vegan media, it is perhaps unsurprising that Markowsi and Roxburgh (2019) find evidence of the fear of vegan stigma as a 'barrier to avoiding meat consumption' among US consumers (p.1).

Default veganism may still seem a way off from becoming everyday reality for the majority. 4N rationalisations appear to be commonplace and are buttressed by mainstream media from early childhood. However, it remains the case that these 'psychological manoeuvres' (Piazza et al., 2015, p.114) and the immense cultural labour required to sustain them are much more effortful, individually and societally, than the simpler resolution of the killer/carer paradox through embracing veganism. As vegans and veganism gain ground and visibility in the cultural mainstream, we suspect that the rationalisation of exploitation will become ever more precarious and vulnerable, and that anti-vegan rhetoric may well be only symptomatic of that vulnerability. Perhaps a peaceable revolution in our relationship with other animals is not too far away.

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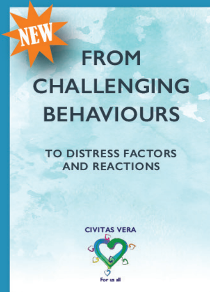

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