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Toward a non-anthropocentric view on the environment and animal welfare: Possible psychological interventions

Commentary on [Treves et al.](#) on *Just Preservation*

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Abstract: Treves, Santiago-Avila, and Lynn (2019) argue for adopting a non-anthropocentric worldview to prevent further environmental damage and lack of consideration for animals. We discuss psychological interventions that might help achieve this.

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Like previous commenters (e.g., Gray, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Tiffin, 2020), we welcome Treves et al.'s (2019) target article. All too often an emphasis on the importance of nature's preservation has been justified for anthropocentric interests only (see Washington, Taylor, Kopnina, Cryer, & Piccolo, 2017). Treves et al. instead suggest that we must adopt a non-anthropocentric worldview to ensure the preservation of *all* species, both human and non-human. That is, we must apply "equal consideration of interests" (Singer, 1995, p. xxii) for all beings. Our treatment of the world, however, indicates that we view it anthropocentrically. One can think of numerous cases of human-caused extinctions of other species (non-human animals and plants; Braje & Erlandson, 2013) and species' habitat destruction due to, for example, palm oil production (Strona, Stringer, Vieilledent, Szantoi, Garcia-Ulloa, & Wich, 2018). Habitat loss and species extinction are examples of anthropocentric speciesism (Caviola & Capraro, forthcoming): prejudice in favour of humans and against animals. Given its negative effects, the question of how a non-anthropocentric worldview can be cultivated and how anthropocentric speciesism can be overcome becomes important. Yet this important issue is left unanswered by Treves et al. Here we propose two practical psychological approaches which could help overcome anthropocentric speciesism: *superordinate identity* and *superordinate generalization*. We reported on a commonly used alternative intervention (factual appeals) in an earlier commentary (Gradidge & Zawisza, 2019).

Superordinate identity. Superordinate identity refers to incorporating outgroups (e.g., non-humans such as animals) into an overarching inclusive ingroup (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990; Greenaway, Wright, Willingham, Reynolds, & Haslam, 2015). For example, a superordinate identity of “humanity” unites humans of all ethnicities, genders, abilities, social classes, ages, social statuses and so forth into one group. Superordinate identities are usually fostered by meeting conditions of the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954). These indicate that groups should be “cooperatively interdependent” and of equal status, among other features (Gaertner et al., 1993; Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019), although these conditions may not be essential (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Encouraging superordinate identities encompassing humanity improves perceptions of human groups that are highly discriminated-against (e.g., decreases racism; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

An inclusive superordinate identity for all species (e.g., as joint inhabitants of the Earth) may encourage positive perceptions of all species, human and non-human. Preliminary research (Auger & Amiot, 2016) suggests that the more contact we have with animals, the more we identify with them. Greater identification with animals is in turn associated with more positive perceptions of animals (Amiot & Bastian, 2017; Bastian & Amiot, 2019). Research is needed, however, to explicitly test interventions involving superordinate identities including humans and other animals. Such interventions may encourage positive contact (real or imagined) with animals as a whole group. Auger & Amiot (2019b), for example, used an imagined intergroup contact intervention for dogs and cows for this purpose. A similar imagined intergroup contact intervention could be used for all animals as a group. Alternatively, interventions may emphasise traits, interests and goals that are shared by humans and animals. Whereas these kinds of intervention have shown promise in reducing human-to-human prejudice (e.g., Sherif, 1967; Adachi, Hodson, & Hoffarth, 2015; Adachi, Hodson, Willoughby, Blank, & Ha, 2016), they have not yet been tested in the context of speciesism. One could attempt to reduce speciesism by highlighting our shared interest in protecting and inhabiting Earth, as opposed to emphasizing dissimilar traits and conflicts of interest between humans and animals (see Gupta, 2019). It may be beneficial to emphasize the Earth we share (shared trait) and what we all will lose if it becomes uninhabitable (shared interest).

Superordinate generalization. An alternative to superordinate identity interventions is superordinate generalization: People may generalize their positive perceptions of “pet” animals to other animals. This is known as the pets as ambassadors hypothesis (Auger & Amiot, 2015; Auger, Amiot, & Bastian, 2015; Serpell & Paul, 1994). Some of our own preliminary work (Gradidge, Zawisza, Harvey, & McDermott, in preparation) suggests that the greater perceived *pet status* of dogs predicts more positive perceptions of both dogs *and pigs*, supporting this generalization effect. Further support comes from Auger and Amiot (2015, 2016, 2019a), who found that pet ownership and greater contact with pets predicted greater identification with animals. They also found that imagined intergroup contact interventions for dogs *or* cows increased identification with the animal’s subgroup (“pets” or “farm” animals) and led to more prosocial behavioural intentions towards animals as a whole (Auger & Amiot, 2019b). Thus, animal ambassadors do not need to be “pet” animals, although further research is needed to compare “pet” versus “non-pet” ambassadors. We also need to investigate when, how and why superordinate generalization occurs. Our studies (Gradidge et al., in preparation) showed that

greater familiarity with dogs predicted greater perceived warmth of dogs, but not pigs, indicating that there may be limitations to the generalization effect. If that is so, further research on how to overcome these boundary conditions would be useful.

Conclusion. In this commentary, we have outlined two promising ways in which Treves et al.'s goal to reduce anthropocentric speciesism could be realised. It is not yet clear (a) whether superordinate identity interventions improve perceptions of and behaviors towards animals (as opposed to people) and (b) in *what situations* and *why* are superordinate identity or superordinate generalization interventions effective? We hope this commentary inspires more researchers to investigate the most effective interventions to reduce anthropocentric speciesism.

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