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# Teaching Process Over Content: Addressing Underlying Psychological Processes and Biases in Learners When Including Non-Human Animals in Education and Social Justice Discourse

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### **Abstract**

*It can be difficult for people to see their connection to non-human animals – or for humans to see themselves as animals at all. Research demonstrates that children from a variety of cultures have difficulty accepting that humans are animals even when they are taught this explicitly in school (Carey, 1985). Regardless, humans are of course animals and deeply interconnected with other species. This paper advocates for moving toward a Humane Pedagogy (Itle-Clark & Comaskey, in press) in educational settings that addresses non-human animal issues and our deep interconnection with them. The paper explores why including non-human animal perspectives when educating learners and addressing the intersectionality of social justice is imperative for optimal human, animal, and environmental health and wellbeing. However, inherent psychological processes and biases should be considered when addressing these topics in educational and social justice discourse to maximize student learning, growth, and development. Guidelines for best practices to optimize and support critical thinking, attitudinal shifts, and behavioral change when teaching learners about non-human animal issues in education settings are explored and offered.*

*Keywords:* humane pedagogy, psychology, psychological processes, social justice, animal welfare, service-learning

**Teaching Process Over Content: Addressing Underlying Psychological Processes and Biases in Learners When Including Non-Human Animals in Education and Social Justice Discourse**

As the global climate crisis and environmental catastrophes intensify, the vulnerability and interconnection of all life is becoming increasingly apparent to a greater number of people. The importance of addressing past and present relations between human and nonhuman animals (henceforth referred to as “animals”) in education and social justice work is more pressing than ever. Educational settings have the potential to ideally provide learners with supportive environments over a period of time. These elements key drivers for sustained prosocial behavior change (Chatterton & Wilson, 2010; Kasperbauer, 2019). Embedding animal inclusive discourse and curriculum in educational settings can effectively raise awareness in learners about the interconnection of all life and cultivate increased empathy and compassion for animals as well as other humans and the earth. Expanding educational discourse to include humane education (Weil, 2006), and specifically humane pedagogy (Itle-Clark & Comaskey, in press) is crucial for developing sustained prosocial behaviors in learners that can propel individual and system level change that benefits all life.

Humane education is defined as learning which is inclusive of compassion and empathy toward people, animals, and the planet and the interconnection among the three (Academy of Prosocial Learning, n.d.; Association of Professional Humane Educators, n.d.; Humane Education Advocates Reaching Teachers, 2019). While ethics, character education, and moral growth and development have long been a focus of educators, and even mandated by law in some cases, clear teaching approaches including the examination of biases and related behavior, have only relatively recently been addressed in educational settings due to successful social

justice work and movements (Itle-Clark & Comaskey, in press). Successful social justice activism shapes educational interventions and procedures, and in turn education further shapes and evolves social justice movements. Harmful human-animal relationships, both in and out of educational settings, have largely been ignored and not interpreted as a social justice issue. Including and recognizing the plight of animals as an intrinsic element of social justice conversations that should be addressed accordingly in educational settings has been proposed by humane education models only relatively recently.

As explained by Itle-Clark & Comaskey:

Within a humane approach to education (a humane pedagogy), species is an intersecting identity in the same way that other forms of stratification such as race, class, age, and gender are. The privileges or disadvantages inherent of each intersecting component become equally valid...The providence of human-kind is linked to humane work and the development of the prosocial traits that create a world in which all living beings are afforded the ability to live as they were meant to, in a fair and comfortable way. In order for this to occur, society must continue to provide humane education and most importantly, to expand the framework of how this education is delivered so the lessons are fair and equitable, without bias toward human or animal-kind, and designed to support each learner (pp.10).

Itle-Clark & Comaskey, (in press) go on to provide a comprehensive account of the evolution of moral education models and the predominant exclusion of animals.

A humane pedagogy empowers learners to identify their values and align their behavior in accordance with them through critical thinking, perspective taking and reflection with support over

time. Implementing a humane pedagogy can help learners to identify the processes of their thinking to reveal psychological biases behind their value creation.

### **Shaping Prosocial Behaviors**

Assistance in developing awareness, giving space for cognitive processing, and providing opportunities to take helpful action with support and feedback over time are key factors toward shaping prosocial human behavior (Hatfield & Wallace, 2004). Educational environments can and have provided successful settings to foster prosocial behavior change incrementally with guided, supportive inquiry to inspire critical thinking and awareness of values and subsequent behavioral alignment with acknowledged values.

While many education systems and curricula have evolved to include traditionally marginalized groups based on race, class, and gender, species bias is rarely included in educational discourse and a missed opportunity to foster critical thinking, compassion, and kindness. Education systems and all social justice movements can benefit from including the examination of animal oppression and domination in their intersectional inquiries to more effectively foster prosocial behavioral change.

The idea that some lives matter less than others is the root of all injustice. Maintaining the belief that animal lives matter less than human lives, resulting in the subsequent participation in individual and systematic behavior that harms and oppresses animals, dampens human empathy and perpetuates injustice toward all marginalized groups (Joy, 2011). Including animal issues when educating learners and addressing the intersectionality of social justice issues is imperative for the continued development of a more equitable world and optimal human, animal, and environmental health and wellbeing. This is because essentially, all modern humans cause

harm to animals in some way through widespread and systematic victimization, exploitation, and oppression. Becoming aware of our participation in sustaining these often-hidden systems of violence provides endless opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, examine choices regarding alternatives to harmful behavior, and engage in meaningful and manageable compassionate action leading to individual and systems level prosocial change.

However, including animals in these investigations and accepting the role of harmful perpetrator in some form can be difficult for learners to bear. Relevant research examined here in psychological and sociological literature can aid educators and social justice activists in effectively cultivating prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Enabling awareness of biases and barriers to increased empathy and compassion regarding animals - in educators, learners, and the systems we live and teach in – can be helpful in overcoming them when including animals in their dialectic. Teaching students the psychological processes of how these biases and barriers develop and why, in addition to teaching content topics around issues that impact animals, are important elements of an effective humane pedagogy.

An abundance of seminal work has transformed and advanced education systems and social justice reform for humans and the environment (eg., Friere (1970); Zajda, Majhanovich& Rust (2006). The intention here is to provide methods to address and overcome barriers to prosocial behavior change in learners by also including animals in educational discourse and action. It is important to examine why animals are so often disregarded in education systems and intersectional social justice work in order to overcome this tendency that is rooted in speciesist thought.

## **Addressing, Exploring, and Acknowledging Implicit Bias: The Impact of Speciesism**

Many, while not all, modern humans have privilege that allows them to access choices that either harm or help others, including animals. As choices are based on beliefs, it is necessary to examine the underlying beliefs that guide otherwise compassionate, kind, and caring people to make unnecessary choices that exploit, harm, and otherwise victimize animals (Joy, 2011). While these choices include harmful acts, they also encompass harmful omissions. These acts and omissions may be explained by understanding the effects of speciesism. The term speciesism was introduced in 1970 by British psychologist Richard Ryder and was further popularized in 1975 by Australian philosopher Peter Singer in his influential book, *Animal Liberation* (Ryder, 2004; Singer, 1975).

Speciesism is the belief in human supremacy and that the interests of one species are inherently more important than members of another species. Speciesist thought is represented and embedded in human behavior, and therefore expressed in public policy and social institutions on all levels, including education systems. This belief system is also responsible for animals being largely neglected in intersectional social justice work, research, and activism. While this is obviously problematic for animals, this additionally leads to missed opportunities for connection, transformation and advocacy in all populations impacted by social injustice.

Research indicates that people who have speciesist attitudes are less empathic, more prejudiced, and closed-minded toward humans who are different from themselves. Caviola, Everett, & Faber (2018) found significant, sizeable correlations between speciesism and three other major forms of prejudice: sexism, racism, and homophobia. Park and Valentino (2019) found that people who are expansive in their view of human rights and welfare are more likely to support animal rights. This correlation between support for animal rights and human rights and

welfare exists on both an individual and state level, even when controlling for state economic dependency on animal agriculture, political ideology, per capita wealth, and religion and race of residents (Park and Valentino, 2019).

This result suggests that the belief that animals have rights reflect a person's understanding of expanded rights and equality for themselves and others. Educators can teach learners to be more mindful of the ways our thoughts and behaviors maintain the status quo, precluding us from thinking and behaving in more expansive and equitable ways on individual and systems levels when we include animals in our inquiry. To teach learners to value equality, they can be invited to become curious about the ways that they may already be indoctrinated into excluding and harming others – both human and animal.

### **Raising the Status of Animals Through Education: Including Animals and Addressing the Intersectionality of Speciesism and Other Oppressions in Educational Discourse**

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2006), civil rights advocate, attorney, and critical race theory scholar, first applied the concept of Intersectionality to feminist theory to describe marginalization at the intersection of race and gender in 1989. It is now common to apply the concept to describe and study ways in which overlapping or intersecting social identities relate to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination that target the most vulnerable members of society through structures such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classism, etc. These forms of oppression do not exist separately from each other, but rather overlap. For example, Crenshaw demonstrates that the independent realities of being black and a woman must be considered when referring to the experience of black women, and any analysis must include these reinforcing interactions (Crenshaw, 2006).

Speciesism continues to be a pervasive oppression that is mostly overlooked by many social justice scholars, activists, and educators. While the concept of Speciesism may allow understanding of how humans often rationalize pain and suffering inflicted upon animals, most of humanity is frequently offended by the suggestion that the moral and ethical considerations we give to members of our own species could or should be extended to nonhumans. For example, when comparisons of animals suffering in factory farms have been made to victims of human slavery and the Holocaust, many people feel outraged, expressing that this comparison trivializes human suffering (Kim, 2011). While this comparison may offend people, and is therefore not always conjured by animal advocates, it does not make it incorrect.

Consider that historically Black and Jewish people have been targeted for discrimination, exploited, and murdered through systems of oppression, and victimized because they were considered inferior by others who then benefitted or somehow derived pleasure from their use and “othering”. Animals are victims of these same systems of oppression and thought. Their species type, as well as cultural perceptions and traditions, defines the ways humans benefit or derive pleasure from their use. For example, billions of animals identified and labeled by humans as “farmed” or “livestock” are killed globally because the animal agriculture industry has tremendous resources to market their products to many people who like the taste and can eat them for a very low direct cost.

Other costs such as people’s health, environmental degradation, and heinous animal cruelty are intentionally hidden from public view and consideration, driving profits for an industry that is further supported and subsidized by government through tax dollars (Hidjo, 2013). Killing and using animals for a variety of other reasons is supported by human social systems and relatively easy from both a brute force and legal perspective. While an estimated 53 billion

chickens, pigs, cows, and other animals are bred and killed every year for consumption in the United States alone, zero federal laws exist to protect animals raised on factory farms, where 99% of the meat that most people consume comes from (see [animalclock.org](http://animalclock.org)). Despite this daunting number and lack of legal protection, speciesism runs so deep, and animals are so oppressed, that many people have difficulty even theoretically talking about them as sentient beings capable of fear, pain, distress, joy, and a plethora of other feelings, even when scientific evidence informs us that they do. Marc Bekoff, Emeritus Professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder and a pioneering cognitive ethologist wrote in his 2013 op-ed “After 2,500 Studies, It's Time to Declare Animal Sentience Proven” in response to the continued skepticism of the sentience of non-human beings. Systems of oppression take on a life of their own, churning profit for the benefit of a few at the expense of many, defying science and rationality. This weaves its way into education and creates a disconnect between all animals and nature.

### **Connecting the Disconnect: Cultivating Empathy and Compassion for All by Including Animals in Education**

Humans may have difficulty seeing animals as they are - sentient beings, worthy of human empathy, concern, and protection that should be included in social justice and prosocial educational work (Carey, 1985). Systems of oppression and the people who contribute to maintaining these systems must see animals as unworthy of consideration and to exist to serve no other purpose than human need and pleasure in order to exploit them without guilt or regret. In order to do this, people must become disconnected to animals emotionally and spiritually. Similar to subjugated human groups, their status must remain low in order for humans to benefit from the domination and oppression. Human behavior exhibits tremendous inconsistency in common attitudes and behaviors toward animals (Joy, 2011). In many countries, children are

read books with messages of kindness toward animals, have animal themed toys and comfort items, pets they live with as family members, and are generally taught to treat animals with compassion. When children are cruel to animals this is generally seen as an indicator of a disturbed and dangerous personality (Ascione, 2001). Simultaneously, youth are taught both formally and informally, that animals exist solely for our use and pleasure. Indoctrinating children to consume animals, hunt for sport, or attend circuses, zoos, and other forms of entertainment geared for youth that are documented to exploit animals is normalized in most cultures. These extremely mixed messages and inconsistent behaviors lead people to dampen their empathy toward animals to relieve the cognitive dissonance this inconsistency creates (Joy, 2011, Lang 2019).

People seek consistency among their cognitions for psychological wellbeing (i.e. thoughts, beliefs, opinions). When conflict exists between attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, something must change to eliminate the dissonance. For example, when people eat animals (behavior) but also have affection for animals and know that they suffer for their consumption (cognition), they are in a state of cognitive dissonance. Dissonance can be resolved in one of three basic ways – changing beliefs, changing actions, and changing perceptions of actions (Joy, 2011; Kasperbauer, 2019). Changing beliefs may be the simplest way to resolve dissonance between actions and beliefs. Many people choose to believe that animals exist to serve humans - that this is simply the natural cycle of life and survival of the fittest. These beliefs are even applied when considering modern animal agricultural methods and the number of animals bred for human consumption. Even though, when people learn more about them, many people would agree there is nothing natural about these systems that cause tremendous suffering and no fair chance of escaping extreme victimization. Others choose to believe that animals don't suffer to

provide their meat, skin, or any number of animal-derived products. Still others may choose to avoid evidence that they do, or just choose not to think about it (Kasperbauer, 2019).

Because of prolific images and exposés on the extreme violence and suffering of animals online and on social media, a growing number of people cannot avoid images of evidence any longer and are changing their behavior, no longer wanting to support and participate in systems that exploit and torture animals for human use. This highlights the second option for resolving dissonance – for example, to change actions by no longer eating or wearing animals (Kasperbauer, 2019). A third way to alleviate dissonance is to change perception of action. An example of changing perception of action could be choosing to purchase meat from purveyors who promise “humane” meat. This option upon further research would be problematic as it is documented that these methods of killing animals for consumption could not process and produce their bodies in sustainable quantities to satisfy the masses demanding them at a price most consumers could afford.

It is important for educators and social justice advocates to consider and address cognitive dissonance toward animals in themselves, their learners, systems of education, and public policy. While people also justify their behaviors through psychological defenses that hurt and exploit other humans, the process and pervasiveness of this practice toward animals is unique. This is because regardless of real or imagined status relative to other people, every person, no matter how oppressed, targeted, or invisible, typically enjoys at least some privileges that animals do not have access to simply because they are human. It is an opportunity to acknowledge and reconsider indoctrination and widespread participation in the perpetration of oppression that most humans participate in – including people who are victims of these systems themselves.

## **Human Identity and Attitudes Toward Animals**

Typically, people differentiate themselves from animals in order to exploit and use them, but also as a way to provide a sense of place for themselves in the world that is above animals in a socially created hierarchy of status. This benefits all humans, regardless of where they may fall on the spectrum of privilege compared to other humans, and can be considered an adaptive need to elevate one's humanity (Kasperbauer, 2019). Human moral evaluations of animals are also determined by this need. Kasperbauer (2019) explored the role of animals as a contrast class to humans drawing from the literature on the dehumanization process. He reminds us that dehumanization was used throughout history to justify cruel treatment of certain groups - Nazis compared Jews to rats; Black American slaves were compared to apes. "The processes at work when we demean other human beings by comparing them to animals are also at work in our everyday evaluations of animals. This can explain some of the contradictions we see in human treatment of other animals. Dehumanization suggests that we are fundamentally motivated to compare ourselves to animals to create opportunities to see ourselves as superior" (p. 2).

Dehumanization is the process of attributing non-human qualities to an animal or another person – and any entity that is seen as sharing attributes with humans can also have those attributes removed (Kasperbauer, 2019). We can understand human psychological thought and attitudes toward animals when we can look at how animal comparisons are used to demean other human beings by identifying them as non-human and labeling them as inferior (Kasperbauer, 2019; Leyans et.al 2001). Dehumanization utilizes the psychology of ingroup/outgroup relations. Kasperbauer notes that a particular type of ingroup/outgroup psychology characterizes how dehumanization processes are applied to animals in two closely related processes (p.3).

- 1) identifying other people (or groups of other people) as non-human.
- 2) identifying other people (or groups of other people) as inferior (infrahumanization).

Labeling people as inferior is the process of infrahumanization – when people are attributed some human qualities but treated as inferior to other humans by comparison. This is often accomplished by denying that they have certain complex emotions that are thought to be distinctly human (Kasperbauer, 2019). The purpose is to create a clear hierarchy regarding who is superior and who is inferior. This is the process found in behavior patterns that subtly dehumanize animals. People can attribute characteristics to animals that establish superiority over them, while not always completely demeaning them. This process allows humans to treat animals as inferior but not entirely worthless – so humans can continue to view them as inferior while simultaneously attributing positive qualities to them (Kasperbauer, 2019).

Negative qualities are attributed to animals when they are viewed as an outgroup to be avoided. The strength of the aversion will be dependent on species as an adaptation to evolutionary pressures, such as predator-prey relationships. Additionally, all animals pose some degree of threat – including domesticated animals we share spaces with – for example, through the transmission of zoonotic diseases. Finally, animals remind us of aspects of our humanity that cause existential anxiety, particularly human fears of death. This is referred to as the “animal reminder” or “mortality salience” (Kasperbauer, 2019; Rozin and Fallon, 1987). Animals’ relatively short lives, dangers experienced living in the wild, existence in nature and victims of human abuse and exploitation all contribute to the human desire to see ourselves as possessing higher status than other animals.

Some animals are dehumanized by people in overtly negative ways. This is typically necessary when killing them for a human derived pleasure, such as eating or wearing them (Joy,

2011). This can also happen when some conflict or hostility exists, perhaps in the wild competing for natural resources, or when domesticated animals behave in ways that people find undesirable or punishable (Kasperbauer, 2019). Animals' different physical features and behaviors, like other groups that are placed in an outgroup category, causes the feeling that they cannot be identified with and can be exploited, denying them ingroup status. Animals may also illicit emotional responses of disgust and fear, or psychological threats in people. Kasperbauer (2019) explains how Terror Management Theory enables us to untangle and understand these human responses to animals. The theory posits that humans are emotionally averse to reminders of their own mortality, a psychological threat known as mortality science. Kasperbauer notes that this stems from animal threats to human physical wellbeing, as well as a core belief that many humans hold that they are somehow special and superior to other animals.

Terror threat management research supports that when humans are reminded of their worldview and important ideals they hold they are enabled to resist thinking about death. Animals often have shorter life spans than humans, domesticated and in the wild because of their vulnerability and victimization by humans. Viewing other animals as significantly different from humans alleviates and suppresses uncomfortable thoughts and truths that humans are vulnerable and at risk for death too (Kasperbauer, 2019). A remedy to this is bringing awareness to learners that this is a function of human psychology for self-protection. Increasing self-esteem and self-compassion, and helping learners identify their values and live in alignment with them can help humans relieve mortality salience by making them feel that they have value and meaning in their lives, even though they will eventually die (Kasperbauer, 2019).

In order to reduce this perceived threat, the process of infrahumanization helps people attribute qualities to animals that makes it easier to live among them. If animals are seen as

having some redeeming qualities, humans can keep interacting with them and deriving benefits from them without feeling threatened. They can be subtly treated as an outgroup that can include positive attributions but still allow justifications to abuse, victimize and exploit them. This process allows humans to feel they are ranked above animals on an imagined social hierarchy that has its roots in Colonialism and Imperialism. Again, the burden of the effects of this process is cultural and species dependent. Typically, animals that physically resemble or are more physically appealing to humans will be attributed more positive mental states and be treated relatively well. So anthropocentric bias influences human mental states and the placement of animals on a hierarchy of worth. Fewer emotions can be attributed to animals that humans eat, wear, test on and otherwise use to allow for the relief of cognitive dissonance. Placing animals in an outgroup makes their victimization and exploitation easier to accept and allows people to justify and participate in individual and systemic behaviors that harm them.

While negative qualities are attributed to animals that drive the human need to differentiate ourselves from them, positive qualities are of course also attributed to them by humans as well. Many people believe that animals deserve care and concern, particularly domesticated animals and any animal humans considered to be physically appealing, or “cute”. We are partial to the companion animals we select to allow into our homes, and we transition them to human “ingroup” from “outgroup” status. These positive attributes and attitudes toward animals likely evolved to help humans cope with the biologically innate discomfort of being around them (Kasperbauer, 2019). While we evolved from being as vulnerable to the predatory and disease risks animals can pose for humans, our ancestors could never avoid them because they benefited from their presence – as modern humans continue to today. Any positive human

attitudes toward animals likely evolved from our need to tolerate them for human advancement (Kasperbauer, 2019).

Teaching learners about these biologically driven tendencies could go a long way in evaluating the harm humans cause our own species as well as when we systematically use and oppress other animals.

### **How Should We Educate Learners to Think About and Treat Animals?**

Taking into account cognitive dissonance and the human need for cognitive distortions such as denial, suppression, justification, and compartmentalization to preserve mental health, as well as the evolutionary adaptations discussed that impact human neurobiology and shape human moral attitudes toward animals, how can we use this information most effectively guide ethical behavior and decision making regarding animals in educational settings? In order to attain achievable and measurable results, we must examine the human psychological limitations mentioned as well as the role of social and political systems that humans exist in to assess human ability to behave ethically toward animals. Teaching learners about the neurobiology of how human negativity bias toward animals contributes to the process of their marginalization, as well as the infrahumanization of animals, are strategies to help learners make choices beyond reactive, adaptive responses toward animals (Siegal, 2012; Smith, Marsh, & Mendoza-Denton, 2010). Teaching learners that while these responses served an evolutionary purpose, current harmful attitudes and behaviors toward animals are not necessary for human survival and are actually causing the opposite effect. Our treatment of other species is creating threats to human survival. We must modify and counteract these adaptive neurobiological tendencies to allow for more evolved responses to animals, as these reactions are at the core of our oldest relationships

with animals and stem from our reptilian brains, rather than using the human capacity more developed, higher level thinking. We can remind learners that fears of other humans are also rooted in evolutionary adaptations. Humans identified as strangers due to differences in appearance such a skin color or social practices were potentially threatening to life, possibly transmitting novel diseases due to maintaining different levels of hygiene or differential adaptation to biological threats (Kasperbauer, 2019; Smith, Marsh, & Mendoza-Denton, 2010). While these innate biases may still exist, they no longer serve a protective function for human survival. In fact, we must overcome them in order to progress toward humanity, peace and inclusion (Kasperbauer, 2019; Smith, Marsh, & Mendoza-Denton, 2010).

Learners can be taught that petkeeping and agriculture required humans to attend to animal's well-being for the first time – and also increased the tendency to control, dominate and exploit them (Kasperbauer, 2019; Larson and Fuller, 2014). One reason animals may have begun to be kept as pets is because they provide various health benefits to humans. They reduce stress, anxiety, blood pressure, and improve recovery time from illnesses and overall well-being (Tedeschi, Jenkins & Perry, 2019). These positive consequences of relationships with animals worked to counteract human implicit biases against them (Kasperbauer, 2019). It is thought that anthropomorphism, the tendency to attribute human qualities to animal, may have developed as a strategy to predict animal behavior that could have enhanced human survival (Bartlett, 2005; Kasperbauer, 2019). According to Kasperbauer (2019) this may be what lead the human tendency to attribute social needs to animals, such as wanting or needing to spend time with humans to be comforted. We can teach learners to understand that from an evolutionary perspective, humans have had pressures to care for animals alongside simultaneous pressures to avoid them. These shared evolutionary adaptations are supported by research that demonstrates

children from diverse cultures engage in rigid ways of thinking about animal identity and development (Kasperbauer, 2019). Children typically learn that humans are animals only through formal education, and even then are reluctant to view humans as animals (Carey, 1985; Kasperbauer, 2019). Evolutionary adaptations that shape human attitudes toward animals can be modified once we are made aware of them, which then creates space for the capacity of choice.

Human psychology has evolved, impacting the creation of laws and public policy that limit morally objectionable biases against human groups that are marginalized. While these changes are slow and still painfully necessary for human equity and justice, it is not a surprise that progress for animals has lagged far behind. However, we have seen some progress in this realm and some animals now enjoy variable protections from public policies and laws (Kasperbauer 2019; Animal Legal Defense Fund, 2019).

### **The Role of Laws and Public Policy in Shaping Human Attitudes Toward Animals**

The treatment of animals is thought to have steadily improved, particularly in recent decades (Kasperbauer 2019; Animal Legal Defense Fund, 2019). However, great variation in human behavior and attitudes toward animals continues, indicating that psychological barriers that occurs and influences this must be examined. While select animals may be receiving improved treatment in some ways, this more likely reflects the improved ability of some concerned groups to lobby for stronger laws and legal protections of animals rather than some deeper widespread moral evolvment among humans (Kasperbauer, 2019).

Behavioral momentum, awareness and precedent should attract more consideration and increased protection of other species. Addressing barriers in human psychology that limit empathy and compassion toward animals will help to meet moral goals concerning them, which will in turn impact the human ability to expand empathy toward and advocacy for other groups

that continue to be marginalized in law and public policy. Examining and becoming aware of the process of ingroup/outgroup psychology and how people dehumanize animals can help learners understand the importance of overcoming these tendencies to move toward a more equitable world through advocating for changes in laws and public policy.

Equipping learners with psychological resources and awareness regarding these subtle threats instigated by other animals and coping mechanisms to deal with these threats like infrahumanization can increase psychological resources to deal with these biologically driven feelings of threat. Teaching learners that the human tendency to elevate themselves above other animals to find meaning in our lives and suppress fears around our own animality is important when learning about and framing our treatment of animals as the socio-political issue it is. The human drive to conquer nature as a survival mechanism has gone too far and has backfired. Indoctrinated thought that animals can and should be used by humans in systematic ways benefits all human groups through profit, pleasure, elevated status, etc. regardless of race, class, gender identification, or religion.

Participating in socially accepted and encouraged behaviors that harm animals drives humans to harm them more. For example, people who eat animals and animal products and identify them as food attribute fewer secondary emotions to all animals than those who do not in order to relieve cognitive dissonance. So, eating some animals generally reduces concern for all animals (Kasperbauer, 2019). Even consistent vegetarians pose a psychological threat to meat eaters if their diet is chosen for moral and health reasons (Kasperbauer, 2019). This may be a reason that vegans, who choose to not use or exploit animals based on ethical and moral concerns, are one of the few identifiable groups that have widespread social support to be mocked (Manjoo, 2019). While companion animals, with whom humans live, are often granted

honorary ingroup status. This status often depends on their neotenous features and the level to which human emotions are projected onto them. Regardless, the human need for infrahumanization of animals impacts companion animals too as evidenced by their widespread mistreatment in the form of abuse, neglect, abandonment, and euthanasia. Companion animals are victimized in large numbers even in countries like the United States that tend to have overall positive attitudes toward them (Kasperbauer, 2019). It is worth noting that U.S. law and public policy generally provides weak protection for companion animals because of animal agricultures' interest and the "slippery slope" argument. If law and public policy protects companion animals, these protections could potentially widen to encompass animals seen as food and limit the profit the industry could gain if they have to consider their welfare or wellbeing in any way before they are killed.

These power imbalances reflected and maintained by law and public policy reduces empathy for animals. Research demonstrates that feeling empathy for another being typically fails to motivate prosocial behavior toward them when there is a discrepancy between two parties in terms of status and power (Kasperbauer, 2019; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). This is obviously highly relevant to interactions between humans and animals. The psychology of dehumanization indicates that we overlook or minimize the suffering of outgroup members, particularly animals, as their status deems them less important (Kasperbauer, 2019).

While laws have been changing to increasingly protect animals, courts will not likely do this proactively without pressure. Legislation is limited because the exploitation of animals is seen as an instrument to improve human quality of life and support human cultural traditions (Kasperbauer, 2019; Leiter, 2013). While human attitudes toward animals are changing in some

parts of the world, we need to build on this behavioral momentum by including relevant topics in educational systems (Kasperbauer, 2019).

Government and corporate behavior motivated by goals of economic growth and profit has contributed to support for intensive exploitation of animals such as factory farms, animal testing, and fashion. However, state sanctioned laws and policies can and have influenced human attitudes toward animals for the better through regulating behavior with consequences. This is a necessary part of changing underlying psychological dispositions, but not enough on their own (Kasperbauer, 2019). Progress in societal prosocial behavior and thought will always require individuals to act outside of the larger dominant society and demand change (Kasperbauer, 2019). Teaching learners the relationship between laws, public policy, and social and psychological processes that shape and are shaped by them are important factors to examine. Learners can then become curious and explore the human ability to act or change on an individual and societal level. If humans continue to expand their empathy and compassion toward animals, we may see more citizen and consumer demand for justice not only through education, but also through the creation and enforcement of ethical laws, practices, and products that protect animals and their interests. This expansion of empathy can be taught, supported, and cultivated in the classroom to benefit all life.

### **Raising Awareness and Encouraging Conscious Choice in Learners**

Psychological processes that pose obstacles to moral attitudes and behavior toward animals are the same that generally affect human ability to act or change in any realm. The main obstacle is that most of human thinking lies outside of conscious awareness (Kasperbauer, 2019, Kornfield, 2008). An example of this is implicit bias. As previously discussed, humans need to alter our beliefs, actions, or perceptions of actions to relieve cognitive dissonance. This impacts

large and small choices regarding how people live, think, eat, dress, entertain themselves, etc. A shift away from belief, action, and perception shaped by a speciesist worldview can emerge from how humans become aware of and experience themselves interacting with the natural world. Learners can consider if they believe that other species and the earth exist purely for human use and pleasure, or if they believe that humans are intimately interconnected with other animals, with an inherent duty to protect other species as well as their own. Humans exist and make choices in varying spaces on this “spectrum of use”. Human moral reasoning and thought regarding how we could and should use other species and the natural world runs deep, influenced by biology as well as historical, cultural, philosophical and religious indoctrination. Speciesist thought has its roots in Imperialism and Colonialism, when nations reaping the spoils derived from exploiting and victimizing indigenous people, animals, and natural resources was perceived as an inherent right and rewarded (Kasperbauer, 2019, Ko, 2019). How do we effectively acknowledge and address these influences in human evolution when becoming aware of our own beliefs and how they are intertwined with other oppressions and expressed in our educational systems? Why should we? In addition to contributing to harm and prejudice in law and public policy that harm animals, humans and the environment, speciesist belief systems also cause harm to individual mental health and well-being.

### **The Contact Hypothesis and Shared Goals**

The contact hypothesis and shared goals states that increased physical contact with information presented about the other group between groups will reduce negative attitudes (Allport, 1954; Kasperbauer, 2019). Information about animals without focused and directed physical contact with animals has been shown to be ineffective for reducing bias toward them (Hazel, Signal & Taylor, 2011; Heleski & Zanella, 2006; Kasperbauer, 2019). An important

aspect of the contact hypothesis is known as the intergroup identity model (Gaertner et. al. 1993). In order to create favorable attitudes toward each other the groups must have a shared identity or see themselves working toward a common goal. Acknowledging the intersectionality of systems that perpetrate human and animal oppressions, aided by ethical animal assisted interactions and service-learning activities involving animals, can move people to see their interconnected well-being with them and move toward this seeing of a shared identity. It is important that there is equal status between groups, that they are cooperative and self-revealing, and supportive norms by authorities within and outside of the contact situation (Kasperbauer, 2019). Training educators and people involved with facilitating human-animal interactions can be taught to conduct lessons and interactions properly so that they lead to prosocial attitudes and behaviors toward animals and not have opposite consequences than intended. This can be accomplished through imagined and simulated contact as well – such as an experience using virtual reality to bear witness to animal suffering and exploitation. The invisibility of many systems of violence is a key factor that allows them to thrive. The more visible these systems become through social media, discussion, self-reflection and education, that less likely it is that people will tolerate them (Kasperbauer, 2019). When the invisible becomes visible, one can clearly see how these systems of oppression and violence toward humans and animals work together, without distinction. Bearing witness to and acknowledging causal systems of suffering and harm through reflection supports awareness and allows space for the expansion of human compassion to include more humans and non-humans.

### **Acknowledge Shared Animality and Shared Humanity**

Educators can extend Martha Nussbaum's "*politics of humanity*" to a "*politics of animality*" to notice shared features of humans and animals, like sentience (Kasperbauer, 2019;

Nussbaum 2004, 2013). There is evidence that this approach can reduce dehumanization of human outgroups, and focusing on the humanness of animals, as opposed to the animality of humans, has been found to improve attitudes toward animals (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan, and Hodson, 2012; Kasperbauer, 2019). This still requires strong guidance, such as interventions that can be conducted in a classroom setting. Appealing to people's underlying moral values, such as duties to animals in terms of harm, fairness, loyalty and purity in the protection of animals is important to create prosocial attitudes and behaviors toward them. Educators must also bring attention to human implicit and explicit attitudes toward animals, including the harmful effects of subtle implicit bias, and explicitly teach how attitudes toward animals are influenced by the psychology of dehumanization.

### **Means to Enhance Education and Discourse**

#### ***Social Emotional Learning, Emotional Literacy, and Speciesism***

Human emotions have been studied deeply over time (see eg., Johnson, 1999). Emotions are largely processed unconsciously and greatly impact human psychology, moral judgments and ethical behavior. Emotions can be difficult to detect, making them difficult to change and often resistant to rational control. Emotions drive people to become cognitively rigid and defend their initial reactions rather than revisiting them in light of new information (Kasperbauer, 2019; Haidt, 2001). Attitudes toward animal suffering are influenced by factors we are not always aware of, including situational factors that impact our emotional judgments and biases. However, these unconscious cognitive experiences can be brought to the surface of awareness, influence attitudes, and improve critical thinking with vast resources such as time, support, motivation, and attention that educational settings can provide. Educators can impact these situational factors that subtly influence emotions and have students notice and practice critically thinking about the

impact of emotions and how they can influence their behavior that hurts or helps others, including animals.

Research on racist attitudes demonstrates that moral change has many emotional and situational obstacles that are the main drivers of attitudes (Kasperbauer, 2019; Wang & Liao, 2011). Typically, learners must be put into situations that are very different from what they would normally experience in order to demonstrate a shift in their biases and judgments. While emotions can be modified with effort and support, the desire to change an emotional response and even making an effort to do so is often insufficient in creating sustained attitudinal and behavior change. Some form of properly informed external support, such as support that can be offered by an educator or mentor, is required to deal with the challenge of external pressures humans experience when shifting behaviors. This is particularly true when a desired behavior does not conform with dominant social norms (Kasperbauer, 2019). Even learners with innate higher intelligence cannot consistently control automatic emotional processes without some form of external assistance (Kasperbauer, 2019). Self-regulation and goal setting that is required for behavioral change is also more difficult to achieve when human mental resources are depleted. Teaching mindfulness techniques, self-compassion, expecting obstacles to changing behavior, identifying personal values and creating meaningful, attainable goals attached to them helps to shape prosocial behaviors incrementally over time and build on them. Measuring progress and providing resources needed to make continued progress is essential. Without this assistance and support, people are limited in their ability to meet their goals, including individual behavioral and social moral goals.

As the world changes through social justice work and influence, dominant attitudes are influenced and may match prosocial goals, making meeting individual goals easier to accomplish

(Kasperbauer, 2019). Social and political change support individual change and vice versa. However, psychological limitations apply to social institutions as well as individuals, as they are simply a collective of humans and their inherent limitations (Kasperbauer, 2019). Working together with other likeminded people is helpful to create prosocial behavioral thought and change, as resources such as time and emotional resilience can be combined and make change more likely than individuals acting on their own. Individuals can combine their strengths to pursue specific moral goals and share decision making procedures over time (Kasperbauer, 2019). The more we know about the capabilities and limitations of human psychology and how humans operate, the more we can use these findings to understand how this in term shapes public policy regarding marginalized groups like animals and inform curriculum and educational procedures in the classroom. We must also address real world conditions and barriers to prosocial behavior such as corruption, poverty, greed, self-interest, apathy, bureaucracy and uncertainty when examining issues that impact animals – which can be accomplished in educational settings (Kasperbauer, 2019; Lawford-Smith, 2012).

### *Service Learning and Creating Opportunities for Compassionate Action*

Students must be given opportunities to engage in activities that can help raise the status of animals, including working toward regulating behavior through law and public policy. Both of these influence how people think about and treat animals. It is important to teach learners how policies can be informed by behavior, such as behavioral economics, boycotting certain business, divesting from harmful industries, and findings in the field of cognitive science to help develop critical thinking and reduce impulsive thought and behavior. Teaching students about these psychological processes, such as developing and outlining plans for psychological change, the psychology of dehumanization, implicit bias, as well as legislation and public policy procedure,

are all important to address when shaping prosocial behavior and attitudes toward animals in learners. They can be given manageable and abundant opportunities to be successful and make a difference in the lives of animals, and share and reflect on their work with their communities.

### *Teaching and Acknowledging the Privilege of Choice*

Humans, at least humans with means, have choice. Science and technology have and will continue to give us an array of choices that will give us the option to choose products, meals, entertainment, and clothing that either cause animals to be dominated, tortured, exploited, or do not. If and when humans alter our choices and the systems in place that cater to them, we may see a shift away from the pain and torture inflicted on animals by humans in staggering numbers. Moving toward this, some feel, is the greatest social movement of our time. Teaching students how to create space between their thoughts, feelings and actions can help them expand their ability to exercise choice.

Can humans learn to consider animals as worthy of our attention, compassion, and kindness in larger numbers? It is, after all, humans who create animal suffering. Only we can stop it with our choices in consumption, how we vote at the polls and every day with our dollars, and our activism. But first we have to experience a shift in the way we see other animals. If we value compassion and kindness, then we can live in alignment with those values and stop supporting industries and systems that exploit, torture and kill non-human animals. It requires us to learn about and examine our own indoctrinations into how we came to believe and accept that other animals exist for human use and pleasure. Once humans change thoughts and minds, hearts will ultimately follow.

*Addressing Speciesism in Education Systems and Social Justice Work*

Civic engagement goals for higher education are defined as assuring that students develop the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference in the civic life of their communities through both political and non-political processes (Ehrlich, 2000). This process should begin early in learner's educational careers to foster success of these goals. We all learn beliefs through our experiences in formal and informal systems of education. Attending to and transforming speciesist beliefs and practices in social justice work and education systems can help accelerate prosocial individual and cultural transformation by developing increased empathy and compassion demonstrated in thought and behavior in the classroom and beyond. This requires an examination of human learning and development in our morality and behavior patterns. An informed approach can forge a path forward into shaping an educational system that applies the depth of knowledge from the fields of the psychology and sociology regarding optimal human growth, development, morality and transformation into consideration when developing curriculum and effective teaching in the field of humane pedagogy.

*Teaching the Underlying Psychological Processes to Expand Compassion Bandwidth and Prosocial Behaviors: Process Over Content*

When promoting prosocial outcomes, it is important to teach the underlying psychological processes that drive human attitudes, emotion, and behavior toward animals in addition to any specific content or facts regarding ways humans oppress and exploit animals. We can teach learners skills to regulate their emotions to get them past fears of being overwhelmed. We can teach strategies for staying with rather than avoiding compassion. We can increase the sense that helping will make a difference, and streamline helping opportunities,

providing learners with low effort ways to show compassion and help. Mind training techniques, such as mindfulness practices, will help learners attend to the present moment and accept internal experiences without judging them. Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor and Viktor E. Frankl said “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom” (Frankl, Boyne, & Winslade, 2017). We can teach learners how to create space to grow and make choices that help, rather than harm, animals, other humans, and the environment.

In order to do this, educators can rely on well-researched mindfulness and therapeutic techniques to support humane education and pedagogy work to most effectively:

- Increase student’s psychological flexibility by practicing to move away from the human tendency to perceive thoughts, images, emotions, and memories as real and unchangeable truths.
- Guide and support students to accept and allow unwanted and uncomfortable private experiences (thoughts, feelings and urges) to come and go without struggling with them. Teaching self-compassion practices and allowing students and educators alike the opportunity to make thoughtful, empowering choices without being led around the nose by impulses and emotions.
- Teach students to connect to the present moment, staying aware of the here and now. Lead and practice having experiences with openness, curiosity, interest, and receptiveness. Leave behind former indoctrinated teachings, regrets from the past or fears of the future that do not serve them or others and get in the way of respectful communication and effective perspective taking.

- Practice and teach having access to an observing self. Experience and cultivate a learning environment that has a more transcendent view of self as a continuity of consciousness, deeply intertwined and interconnected with other humans, animals, and the environment we share.
- Identify and clarify our own values and assist students to do the same. Dedicate time to explore and discover what is most important to yourself and others in a supportive environment. For example, peace, justice and freedom are core values that many people may believe all beings are entitled to. Once identified, learners can consider how to act and behave accordingly to that held belief.
- Take committed action and model your message. Embodied teaching is vital to delivering effective humane education programs and pedagogy. Set teaching goals according to your values and carry them out responsibly, in the service of a meaningful life, and share your experiences with your learners and community, helping students to do the same. Practice and teach methods of self-care to carry you and your learners through the inevitable struggles that come with being on the forefront of creating positive social change. Forgive yourself and teach students to do the same when they inevitably fail at times. Teach strategies to move on, correct and continue with compassion for yourself and others. Practice and teach being kind and listen with an open heart and mind in communications, rather than perpetrate further disconnect and violence. We are all a work in progress, educators and students alike. We all need support over time and need to create equitable systems we can rely on.

Solving problems in social systems and creating cultural change takes resources, scope of vision and the ability to mediate conflict over different perspectives. Participatory models bring

people together from different groups and skill sets to increase perspective exchanges and communication. While we do not have large scale social support for this because of powerful actors and resources, we have the ability to create this in our classrooms. Educators can provide a larger framework and help students engage in advocacy, policy change, and leadership. Even conflicting groups can come together when looking at long-term interests that relate to animal protection– for example, less violence in the world, or reducing factors that drive climate change. Diversity of group members can bring solutions to social problems and oppressive systems by facing each other, processing disagreements, and effectively communicating. It is difficult to demonstrate empathy and perspective taking once conflict begins. Bring students into an emotionally safe environment, establish common values in the group, create space for all students to have the time to talk with no interruptions, and establish guidelines and ways of behaving to reduce conflict that inevitably surface when solving social problems we want learners to tackle. Promote respectful sharing of a diversity of opinions, have contingencies when rules aren't followed, and rotate roles frequently to equalize power dynamics. This creates opportunities to reflect on our own behaviors, reinforces prosocial behavior in others, and leads students to come to common understandings while educating them, rather than indoctrinating them. Practices that encourage empathy, such as mutual introductions, active listening, sharing values, and life experiences that brought them to where they are while establishing higher goals and discovering what learners have in common are motivating for students. Rules that value supportive hierarchicals, such as being part of a group and bringing people together, increases the likelihood of empathic responses as the group feels their role in problem solving. Practices that encourage acceptance and commitment, such as hearing and accepting other's values, clarifying and committing to the group's core values, exploring emotional discomfort such as shame, conflict,

and anxiety, rather than escaping or avoiding it will maximize opportunities for recognizing positive exchanges (Guildford Publications, 1970). Teaching practices to respect and encourage difference, and having everyone speak respectfully and listen actively keeps learners on track. Learning how to listen, manage disagreements with honesty and prevent avoidance will encourage students to speak up and give them a willingness to hear new ideas. This allows for the reinforcement of innovation, and brings diverse perspectives together to prevent impulsive reactions. Instead, learners can develop critical thinking, decrease group polarization and create and reinforce alternate behaviors when problem solving around behaviors that cause harm. It is important to help group members view others from a behavioral standpoint – not that others are “dumb”, but to perspective take and see that everyone is behaving in response to their own history and context. Teaching students to take more of an observer role rather than just listening to the words or seeing the behaviors that are right in front of them is helpful. Creating common and interlocking practices that can be sustained outside of the learning environment to promote generalization of behavior. For instance, take the interpersonal process that has led to more effective behaviors inside the classroom to outside of the classroom by demonstrating work done to the larger community. Continue to tease out the most effective processes. Humans tend to be divorced from contingencies that matter as we often do not see the consequences of our behavior. We must keep this in our own and our learner’s consciousness as we forge ahead toward creating real and sustained equitable change for all animals – including humans.

### **Student Feedback**

Examples of comments from college students immersed in learning guided by Humane Pedagogical principles and the above guidelines are shared here to illustrate the potential for shifting attitudes and behaviors regarding issues that impact animals as well as other humans and

the environment. Students reported “What I liked best about the class” on a college wide survey after taking a semester long class entitled “Species Justice” that teaches learners about issues in animal protection, law, and public policy.

- “I thought that the topics we learned were really interesting. It was a class I wasn’t really interested in initially taking and I ended up learning so much! I can’t wait to recommend it to others”.
- “This course discusses such important and relevant topics that I never would have thought I’d have the opportunity to study in college. It was so eye opening and I think every student should have to take it”.
- “This course really taught me a lot of things I never knew about and got me thinking differently about things”.
- “I strongly believe that this class should be part of the core classes because of the impact it has on the world and our education as a whole”.
- “...Inspiring and makes you want to get involved”.
- “You have changed my perspective on an immense amount of things, and I’m truly grateful you teach these topics”.
- “...(The professor) had a clear command of the material without forcing her ideas on anyone, rather the objective was to present the ideas to everyone so that they could make decisions for themselves, which I think is the goal of education. All in all, this class has made a huge impact on my (college) career”.
- “(The course) opened my eyes to the issues currently occurring in the world, those of which people need to know about before they interact with certain groups and people in the world”.
- “(T)he class was great and taught me a lot about a subject that doesn’t get a lot of attention, and for that I am thankful”.
- “This course really made me want to go out and change the world for the better”.
- “This class spoke about some extremely important topics that I believe most college age students are extremely apathetic towards. This class presented real time, real life issues that are affecting billions of people and non-human animals and I believe this course should be REQUIRED for all students, especially as we move into the future”.
- “The fact that my “norm” was challenged and I got to see a different side of my everyday choices”.

### **Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Studies**

This article has relied heavily on relevant research examining the development of moral attitudes and social change and suggests applying these findings to educational settings with learners who will benefit from framing animal protection issues as a social justice concern.

Clear limitations exist in the minimal anecdotal data provided. However, it is offered as an

indication of the possibilities and potential impact of these methods that are currently being examined thoroughly and empirically for future studies that essentially teaches learners human *processes* in thinking, feeling, and behaving *along* with specific content around a variety of animal protection issues within a Humane Pedagogy framework. The author is currently analyzing detailed data taken before and after relevant courses related to behavior and attitude shifts toward animals among students. The intention is to add knowledge and provide valuable tools for educators, as well as clarifying best practices in Humane Pedagogy when including animals in educational and social justice discourse. The hope is to drive social progress toward a more humane and equitable world for all sentient beings.

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