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Editors' introduction to the special issue "Privilege, vulnerability and care: Interspecies dynamics in rural landscapes"

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INTRODUCTION

Animals are central actors within rural societies but remain largely invisible within both our empirical and theoretical analyses. Approximately 20 years ago in the pages of this journal, Tovey (2003) pointed to the significance of animals in effectively defining rurality: They are central to the rural economy and society and foster a sense among rural residents that they are organically embedded in an interspecies world. Thus, our shared relations with animals are key to understanding rural social relations and their underlying inequalities and hierarchies. Tovey suggested that it was therefore necessary and appropriate that rural sociology should develop its own approach to including animals in theorising rural society. We believe that such an approach is yet to emerge. The aim of this special issue is to outline what such an approach might look like and to present a diverse range of articles to get it underway. In what follows, then, as editors and contributors, we collectively explore the role and significance of human–animal relations in shaping rural society via a particular focus on relations of privilege, vulnerability and care.

THE 'ANIMAL TURN' AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

There has been a significant and far-reaching 'animal turn' across the social sciences. In geography, for example, an increasing focus on 'animal spaces' and 'beastly places' (Philo & Wilbert, 2000) has developed our understanding of how animals make and inhabit places (Hovorka et al., 2021). These attempts to 'hear the cry' of animals pose ontological and methodological challenges, expose previously unacknowledged power relations and encourage us to expand our interest beyond the most commonly considered species (Gibbs, 2020; see also Buller, 2014; Hovorka, 2018). Similarly, within history, taking animals seriously helps us develop more complete histories and also challenges basic assumptions of the discipline such as the historian's epistemic authority (Domanska, 2017; Fudge, 2017). Thus, Swart (2010) suggests that including other species in understanding the past is not an esoteric occupation but a radical challenge to the discipline as a whole; it represents another way of 'doing history' that recentres a marginalised group within the disciplinary line of sight. Sociologists have been slower to take up the animal challenge, partly because of their reluctance to consider animals as an oppressed group (Arluke, 2003) and 'society' as a more-than-human phenomenon (Peggs, 2013). Carter and Charles (2018, p. 81) argue that 'sociology has had a fraught relationship with biology, that it is based on assumptions about human exceptionalism and that its emergence as a discipline has to be understood in the context of industrialisation and urbanisation'. Nonetheless, in recent years, we have brought animals into the sociological study of alienation (Stuart et al., 2013), violence (Cudworth, 2015), work (Dashper, 2020), sustainability (Wadham, 2020) and technology (Latimer & Birke, 2009), for example, extending our understanding of these concepts by doing so.

Beyond academia, there has been growing awareness and acceptance of animals as members of society. In the UK, for example, 53% of adults have a companion animal, with an estimated population of 11 million dogs and 11 million cats (PDSA, 2023), equalling the numbers found in the EU (Statista, 2023). Similarly, many of the 500,000 people foregoing meat in 'Veganuary' cite reducing animal suffering as a key motivator (Guardian, 2021). Elsewhere in Europe, these changing understandings of relations between humans and animals are increasingly acknowledged through initiatives and laws such as the recognition of animal rights in the German and Swiss constitutions and the Great Ape Project to extend legal personhood to gorillas and other large primates, which began in Spain's Balearic Islands in 2007 (Pozas Terrados, 2020).

Rural sociology risks becoming marginalised within these wider efforts to include animals within academic and public discussion. Since Tovey's call to action in 2003, human–animal relations have sometimes featured in rural sociology, including the special issue on 'Animals and disease' in *Sociologia Ruralis* in 2009 and successive European Society for Rural Sociology conferences. Researchers have explored important issues related to farm animal welfare (e.g., Bock & Buller, 2013; Kjærnes et al., 2022), animal husbandry (e.g., Bassi et al, 2019; de Krom, 2015), conservation (e.g., Evans & Yarwood, 2000; Soini et al, 2012) and animal diseases (e.g., Cassidy, 2012; Naylor et al., 2018). However, even where they do feature, animals are not necessarily visible as social actors in their own right but take on the role of background extras in an otherwise human story, often subsumed under broad labels (e.g., farm animals) or reduced to their value to humans (e.g., meat). Sociology is about societies in all their complexities, and it must therefore recognise that our lives are 'infused with nonhuman animals and … embedded in multifaceted life worlds' (Peggs, 2013, p. 603). Given the centrality of animals within rural life worlds in particular, then, interspecies relations should concern rural sociology broadly.

This special issue aims to integrate animals fully and theoretically into our understanding of rural society and to place rural sociology in the centre of wider discussions about human–animal

relations. A notable example of the kind of interspecies approach for which we are advocating is provided by Stuart et al. (2013), who apply Marx's concept of alienation to dairy cows. They find that even where robotic milking systems enable them to have greater control over their lives and work, cows (and people) will continue to be alienated in a system that prioritises profits. Similarly, drawing on Bourdieu's types of capital, Butler and Holloway (2016) point to a 'hybrid' capital, which brings together people, cows and technology in a way that changes the day-to-day lives of people and animals alike and effectively shifts the power relations that permeate their shared labour. The influence of these articles within and beyond rural sociology demonstrates the usefulness of acknowledging 'species' as a sociological category like race, class or gender rather than just 'adding animals in' to our existing analyses (Swart, 2010; Wilkie, 2015).

There is a growing recognition and acknowledgement across the social sciences that agency extends beyond the human world that other animals can and do shape human societies (Dashper, 2017) and that humans and human societies cannot be understood as separate from other animals (Ogden et al., 2013). We thus encourage rural sociologists to embrace the multispecies nature of the rural and the often messy entanglements between humans and other animals within rural spaces, practices and communities, recognising other animals as actors in interaction with each other, with humans and the environment.

In order to do this, we must also be open to a range of methodological approaches. One particularly influential approach is that of new materialism, which includes the actor-network theory (e.g., Latour, 2007; Law, 2004) but also the ideas of Barad (2007), Ingold (2008) and Whatmore (2002), among others. These new materialist approaches deny any 'a priori ontological assumption of human superiority' and promise to rethink the social world and the place of people, animals and other actors within it (Taylor, 2011, p. 212). The 'social' does not exist prior to interaction but rather emerges through interactions between diverse actors including humans, animals, objects, ideas and technology. This implies a wider shift away from those doing the relating (i.e., the human subject who has the capacity to act intentionally) towards the relational webs and practices that connect humans and other actors (Wadham, 2021). It has therefore been enthusiastically embraced by human–animal scholars.

A slightly different relational approach to the agency of animals aims at being sensitive to their actions and experiences in interaction with humans (e.g., Birke et al., 2004; Buller, 2014; Karkulehto & Schuurman, 2021; McFarland & Hediger, 2009; Schuurman, 2021). Much of this work draws on Haraway's (2008) writings about becoming with a significant other of another species, especially focusing on her relationship with her dog Cayenne. Another notable example includes the sociological study by Despret and Porcher (2015) on sheep farming, where the rigid dichotomy of human/animal is bypassed in favour of an analysis of how some farmers are attentive to the sheep as willing co-workers with their own competences and knowledge production. Often embracing the practice of multispecies ethnography, interdisciplinary methods and insights are drawn on to explore the 'contact zones' between humans and other animals that try to create 'qualitatively rich and trustworthy accounts of naturecultures and the relations between humans and animals' (Madden, 2014, p. 290; also see Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010).

This special issue—and the interspecies approach we put forward—thus adds to the wider existing body of knowledge on human–animal relations in conceptual, empirical and methodological terms. In so doing, it challenges anthropocentrism in a way that takes animals to matter *for themselves* and to have important roles to play in more-than-human worlds. We will now briefly outline the five articles included within the special issue and highlight their individual contribution to existing scholarship, before identifying the common themes that help establish a future research agenda for an interspecies approach to rural sociology.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTICLES

Our starting point for the special issue was that we wanted to take a broad approach to defining both the debates concerned and an interspecies perspective. We thus invited articles on a wide range of themes including everyday practices, migration, relations between generations, rural work and livelihoods and climate change and conservation. Likewise, we assumed that an interspecies perspective might encompass human relations with any other species, whether wild, domestic or in-between (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). The articles included here thus cover a wide range of issues, species and contexts, but they are held together by a shared commitment to an interspecies perspective, broadly understood. We will now introduce each article in turn.

In 'Interspecies encounters with endemic health conditions', Lewis Holloway, Niamh Mahon, Beth Clark and Amy Proctor explore how lameness and bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) are co-produced between farm animals and people, within different farmed environments. Their analysis demonstrates how intersubjective relationships between people and animals (in this case, sheep and cows) can play a role in the prevention and treatment of endemic disease, and how these are in turn embedded within specific farming contexts but also the broader sociocultural milieu of farming. Likewise, they demonstrate how animal agency, embodiment, and environmental factors all contribute to the enactment of 'disease situations'. Thus, endemic diseases like lameness and BVD emerge as not just a matter of animal health but also a social and environmental issue. Finally, by focusing on how sheep and cows engage with and resist on-farm interventions to prevent and treat these diseases, the authors demonstrate how animals can challenge the power dynamics of farming, albeit in a limited way.

In 'Beekeeping, stewardship and multispecies care in rural contexts', Siobhan Maderson and Emily Elsner-Adams explore the potential of beekeeping to promote sustainable socio-ecological transitions. Drawing on UK-based fieldwork, they examine how beekeepers navigate complex interspecies relationships and develop a sense of stewardship for their bees and the wider environment. The article challenges anthropocentric views of nature by highlighting the importance of considering the needs of all species within rural landscapes. In so doing, the authors illuminate the challenges and opportunities that rural communities face in promoting more sustainable and equitable relationships between humans and other species. In this context, beekeepers emerge as stewards of multispecies wellbeing and guardians of tacit and hybrid environmental knowledge. As such, they both contribute to more sustainable and ethical human–animal relationships but also (and more widely) to the wellbeing and resilience of the communities in which they live. According to the authors, then, beekeeping might usefully serve as a model for other rural actors and communities in the so-called just transition.

Holly Randell-Moon's article on 'The mice plague and assemblage of beastly landscapes in regional and rural Australia' focuses on how this 2020 event revealed the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans in the context of settler colonial rural landscapes and how this was represented in the media. The article explores how mice and rats were effectively rendered as abject matter out of place. By disturbing anthropocentric conceptions of the 'natural' order of things—namely, that landscapes exist as a backdrop to monocultural farming—the plague thereby unsettled colonial imaginaries of human control over the environment. The author suggests that this in turn revealed a landscape in which mice and rats are not simply pests to be eradicated but dynamic actors with their own agency and interests. In effectively decentring the human, the author suggests that this particular event offers us a way to rethink how humans and other animal species cohabit in rural landscapes. Crucial to this analysis is the role of the media. While

forming an important vector for environmental literacy, the reporting in this case nonetheless occluded important contextualising information about the history of monocultural farming and its consequences.

Salini Saha's article on 'Sacred serpents and the discourse on conservation' explores the shared vulnerability of cobras and people to changing climatic conditions in rural India. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Bardhaman, where rainfall and monsoon patterns have become increasingly erratic, the author traces the evolving existence and agency of a particular variety of monocled cobra, known locally as Jhanglai, and their role in shaping human lives and practices. The snakes' complex status as both sacred beings and everyday neighbours defies neat categorisation within existing dichotomies such as wild versus domestic and helps give rise to alternative understandings of conservation. That is, the cobras' continued survival is intertwined with religious and cultural practices, highlighting the importance of considering Indigenous knowledge systems in conservation efforts. Further, the article explores how the interaction with sacred snakes contributes to the reproduction of rural community consciousness and indigeneity. Contrasting insider and outsider perspectives, the author thus demonstrates how human–animal interactions are integral to the formation of local identities and worldviews.

In 'Making meat moral', Hanna Wernersson and Wiebren Boonstra explore rearing and killing practices within Swedish cattle farming—and their moral sustainability—via an ethnographic study of two contrasting cases. Their article illuminates how farming moralities are not simply abstract beliefs about right and wrong but rather are situated, embedded and relational beliefs that are shaped by the specific practices of work in which farmers engage and how they know and value their animals. On larger farms, animals emerge as worked subjects serving primarily as inputs, with farming moralities emerging that prioritise efficiency and productivity. On smaller farms, in contrast, animals are seen by farmers as working subjects, actively co-shaping everyday doings. In this context, farming moralities are more likely to prioritise animal welfare and sustainability. The authors thereby conclude that sustainability transitions in animal farming should focus less on establishing alternative moralities than on limiting the scale of farming practices and privileging their endogeneity.

COMMON THEMES: SETTING OUT AN AGENDA FOR AN INTERSPECIES APPROACH TO RURAL SOCIOLOGY

People living in rural contexts in Europe and elsewhere are entangled with multiple species in many different ways in many different contexts. However, a tendency within rural sociology to see animals through their usefulness to humans—usually as a source of food—limits both the range of animals and settings under analysis. Most animal-centred research in rural sociology (including the articles in *Sociologia Ruralis* cited above) centres on farms and the productive role of the animals that live there. This in turn leads to a focus on particular species, spaces and theoretical issues. Thus, an interspecies approach—that values animals for themselves—would expand our understanding in three ways.

First, it would bring into focus not only farm animals like cows, pigs and sheep but also domestic animals that share our homes and wild animals that live beyond. Developing our understanding of this broader 'moral community' is a matter of justice since we owe respect to *all* of the animals with whom we are bound up in a complex web of relationships, not just those that are most immediately useful to us (Buller, 2014). The articles in this special issue show how important animals across all three categories of animal identified by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011)—wild,

such as the serpents in Saha's article and the bees in Maderson and Elsner-Adam's study; domesticated, including the farm animals in both Holloway, Mahon, Clark and Proctor's research and Wernersson and Boonstra's ethnography; and liminal animals, which could include the mice in Randell-Moon's article—are to rural societies.

Second, an interspecies approach enables us to recognise the farm as just one important site for rural interspecies interactions and encounter animals in many other rural spaces, such as homes, gardens, fields, forests, roads, horse yards, villages, national parks, industrial areas, harbours and so on. If we take seriously the proposition that the rural is a truly multispecies phenomenon, then all rural spaces provide important settings for investigating interspecies encounters.

This leads to a third expansion in our thinking, namely, at the level of theory. An interspecies approach enables us to rethink categorical boundaries, reflecting on what it means to be a farm, companion or wild animal. By focusing on this broader range of categories, we might also expand our theoretical understanding. A focus on farm animals leads to a particular (and understandable) concern with concepts like welfare, biosecurity and breeding, for example. By contrast, turning to companion animals might open up new perspectives on other topics like the way family or friendship is understood and experienced in rural contexts. Likewise, a greater emphasis on wild animals might illuminate our understanding of the politics and practice of sustainability or mobility in rural areas. A critical lens to the construction of animal categories would also create an opportunity to explore the friction between human-induced roles for animals and their own agencies and experiences. As a consequence, it would be possible to explore in depth the fluidity of categorical boundaries as well as animals that occupy liminal positions in the anthropocentric world (Franklin & Schuurman, 2019).

This special issue is a call to action to rural sociologists to heed Tovey's (2003) call and (re)position animals as integral to understanding rural societies. The articles that follow illustrate some of the complex, messy and often unexpected entanglements between humans and other animals in different rural spaces and start the process of finally embracing the 'animal turn' in rural sociology.

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