

CONFERENCE REPORTS

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People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship: The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations, Glasgow, Scotland. October 2004,

In the mid-1990s, my family unexpectedly acquired a second dog—a purebred from an uncommon breed. Soon after he arrived, he developed some puzzling behavioral problems. Hoping that I could find someone familiar with the breed, I attended a local dog show known for attracting exhibitors from across North America. Not only did I find the help I sought, I also discovered the Human Animal Bond Association of Canada (HABAC). It had a booth at the show. That was the beginning of my involvement in the study of human-animal interactions, which has included serving on the Board of Directors of HABAC. It has culminated in my beginning my own program of research in the field. In October 2004, the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO) sponsored a conference in Glasgow, Scotland “People and Animals: A Timeless Relationship,” which I attended.

IAHAIO is an umbrella organization, founded in 1990 and based at the Delta Society in Renton, Washington, to provide a structure through which national organizations could communicate. Its mission is, “To promote research, education and sharing of information about human-animal interaction and the unique role that animals play in human well-being and quality of life.” It has three broad goals:

1. “To promote new research, educational and practical development in the field of human-animal interaction”;
2. “To provide a forum for sharing ideas and information between IAHAIO member organizations” and;
3. “To educate policy makers at local, national and international levels about the benefits of human-animal interaction.”

IAHAIO holds an annual meeting for representatives from its member organizations and, every three years, an international conference. The international conference in Glasgow was the 10th; the next, in 2007, will be in Tokyo.

All three goals were addressed at the conference; however, the first and second goals were most evident. The conference provided a forum for researchers, educators, and practitioners to share ideas and information. With more than 50 oral presentations

and 79 posters—and because the topics were so varied—it is somewhat difficult to characterize the conference overall. A predominance of presentations related to the therapeutic role of animals with a variety of populations that included children, the elderly, trauma victims, and the disabled. Others focused on legal and social policy issues, improving the care of companion animals, the training of veterinarians, and humane education. Most of the discussion pertained to companion animals. There were a few presentations on animal cruelty and animal welfare, although the subject of animal rights was not an overt part of the lexicon. There was considerable emphasis on practice and education with less emphasis on research.

As a researcher in the area of human-animal studies (HAS) I am quite isolated, and I suspect that I am not alone—as it were—in my isolation. My colleagues in my academic department view my interest in HAS as a hobby, and I am aware of others in academic settings who perceive that their work is marginalized. To be at a conference where everyone was interested in HAS was a rare treat. I cannot remember being so captivated at a professional conference. However, having had a few months to reflect on my experience and having the chance to write this article, I wanted to make some observations about the state of research in the study of HAS. To do that, I will focus on three presentations that made a particularly positive impression on me.

The first was a plenary session presented by Arnold Arluke, a sociologist from Northeastern University in Boston, entitled, “Understanding the ‘No-Kill’ Controversy: The Role of Surface and Deep Tensions in Humane Communities.” Arluke described his ethnographic research into the controversy within humane communities regarding the best way to deal with animal overpopulation. The conflict centers on the use of euthanasia, dividing workers in “open-admission” shelters and “no-kill” shelters, respectively. Arluke spent six months as an observer in two shelters in the United States to identify the components of the controversy and explain its intensity. Arluke identified several contributing factors including two different paradigms and definitions of being humane; perceptions of honesty and dishonesty; and, ultimately, the role of identity as a shelter worker. However, his research also revealed some common ground upon which the two factions might reconcile their differences.

In a different vein, Judith Levicoff described a school-based program that was hands-on, in which children learn about monarch butterflies by raising them, observing them, and planting gardens to attract them. The program combines the science involved in understanding the monarchs—their physiology, reproduction, and migration patterns—and an appreciation of the monarch as a living being. Levicoff spoke with an enviable intensity about a topic that obviously is very close to her heart.

For me, “The 1000 Pound Therapist” was a unique presentation. In an arena, accompanied by one of their horses, David and Annie Tidmarsh introduced equine-assisted psychotherapy. This type of therapy does not involve riding; indeed, it is not even necessary for the client to enjoy horses. The horse’s role is to be a stimulus for the clients to explore their feelings and conflicts. The session began with our (the audience) being asked to give the horse a name in our own minds. We then were invited to volunteer the name we had chosen and to discuss our reasons. It very quickly became evident how each of us drew on our own feelings and perspectives in choosing a name. The couple walked us through a series of exercises in which pairs of people cooperated in putting a halter on the horse, leading the horse through a serpentine pattern, and guiding the horse through the pattern with leads that were not quite long enough for the job. As each of these tasks became a medium for talking about feelings, the potential for this type of therapy became apparent, especially for counseling with couples.

I have singled out these three presentations because they were excellent examples of research, education, and practice, respectively, in the HAS field. However, I also want to use them to discuss some significant tensions within the field that became evident at the conference. The first, as Cindy Wilson alluded to in a plenary session entitled, “Human Animal Interactions and Health: Best Evidence.” is the disconnection between the scientists and practitioners—I hope I can express this without stepping on any toes. I am a relative newcomer to HAS, particularly as a researcher. However, for 25 years I have been a researcher and recognized expert in my own field. Within the field of psychology, mine is a relatively new area of study, an area that has evidenced many—if not all—of the growing pains that I perceive within the field of HAS.

The first tension is, as Wilson pointed out, the need for evidence-based practice. As an equine enthusiast, I found the Tidmarsh demonstration compelling. I have no doubt that this can be an effective type of therapy for some people. Without taking away from the Tidmarshes’ expertise in this area, however, I was left with many questions that are amenable to scientific investigation.

On a theoretical level, why horses? On a practical level, can this therapy—compared to other therapies—be shown to be effective enough to justify the expense and other practical considerations of instituting such a program? For whom will this type of therapy work best? We need to address these questions before my colleagues in psychology take this type of enterprise seriously.

Many excellent practitioners have little interest in research; however, they need to have an appreciation of the importance of evidence-based practice, which—at least

in North America—is becoming a watchword in the helping professions. What this calls for is a way of forming partnerships between practitioners and researchers in order to strengthen the credibility of the HAS field, which—as many of us know—is not taken seriously in many quarters.

The Monarch Butterfly project raises similar questions. To me, that hands-on experience is what science should be about. However, here is a researchable question that should interest those of us in the HAS field: In what way is it contributing to the students' humane understanding of the animal world and which components of the program make the greatest contribution? Further, what is the value of humane education, that is, what are the concrete outcomes? Understanding what a program does, even when it is so self-evidently interesting and valuable, is important in education. As a professor in a school of education, I have seen, over the years, pedagogical strategies come and go. Something as important as humane education should not be left to the whim of educators who—to be fair—still are struggling with what they think are the basics. Again, what this project raises for me is the question of really understanding what we are doing as educators and the importance of building a research base to support what we are doing.

Arluke's study raises different issues, particularly as to where HAS studies intersect with specific disciplines and other areas of study. The dynamics between the two shelter factions were very similar to the dynamics that I have observed within communities that are similarly (I would suggest) oppressed and disempowered. As a community psychologist, I am interested in the implications of his study beyond the field of HAS and its implications for other types of communities involved in social issues and social change. In my experience, part of the maturation of a field is to begin to expand the context in which we understand our work. That includes finding relationships with research in other areas.

My brief experience at the IAHAIO conference reinforced my belief that I have become involved in a field that is exciting, challenging, and critically important to the human experience. We owe it to the development of the field to work collaboratively to link theory, research, and practice to build an even stronger foundation from which to promote the human-animal bond.

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