

Controversial connections. Human/animal relations in the city

Starts: 2010

Ends: 2013

Description: The project **Controversial connections** concerns the frequently occurring debates over other animals. We can regularly read about urban issues like dogs attacking children, conflicts over exaggerated duck-feeding and people who house countless number of cats in apartments. These are just a few examples of when animals become a source of controversy through and between humans. These controversies are not easily solved. On the contrary, they seem to be endless. However, animals also often play the role of social facilitators. This project investigates this ambiguous role of animals – the controversial connections – and the conditions under which such relationships become conflictual and how these processes take place. Such knowledge provides an important base for political decision making and thus contributes to a sustainable development that includes animals, not just as objects of human culture but also as subjects and actors.

In a comparative project, we draw on the work done within the field of animal studies, and combine this with insights from controversy studies in science and technology studies (STS) and risk research. The controversies over animals that we are interested in, involve three different layers:

- Actor. Interaction with animals, identity construction, meaning making and practices that comes out of historical and biographical situatedness.
- Culture. Collective group cultures and practices as they are learned and transformed within social groups such as a cat shelter or an ornithological society.
- Policy. Institutional actors and processes such as national policies, local animal welfare officers and experts, media, policy makers, scientists and experts on animal behaviour or wildlife management.

The overall objective of the project is to explore and understand the dynamics and processes of controversial human-non-human animal relations, analysing the interconnections of different levels (actors, culture and policy). We will focus on specific cases of relations between humans and animals in urban and rural contexts in order to answer the research questions below:

- When and why are human-non-human animal relations called into question in urban and rural settings? How are these relations situated? What role does 'place' play in these relations?
- What identities are constituted through the debates? How can these identities and relations be analysed from an 'intersectional' perspective, looking at interconnections with the power axes of species, gender, class and race?
- How are these conflicts handled by experts (e.g. animal welfare officers, animal police), politicians and lay people?
- What different resources/arguments are used in the debates (economical, scientific, health) and with what effects? Who is enrolled as an expert? What facts are established as facts and how?
- What sociological insights can be drawn from the phenomenon, when trying to understand broader societal and cultural movements such as urbanisation, modernity and risk?

Publications:

- Holmberg, Tora (2011) *Controversial connections. Urban studies beyond the human*, in *Undisciplined Animals. Invitations to animal studies*, Segerdahl, P. (ed.) Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Cambridge.
- Holmberg, Tora, *Trans-species urban politics. Stories from a beach*, *Space and Culture* (submitted)