

COMMENTARY

Animals laboring for humans: Integrating animal dignity into I-O psychology

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Hernandez et al. (2025), in their focal article, have put the spotlight on the role of animals in I-O psychology. It is true that animals are neglected by I-O psychologists, who have traditionally focused on human beings in the workplace and how they feel, perceive, and behave. It is therefore of great importance to extend our reach and research to animals. In this piece, we raise the question how I-O psychology can theorize on animals in the workplace. In so doing, we advocate integrating a dignity perspective on animals (Bal, 2017; Challenger, 2003) into the field to postulate possible research questions and provide answers as to how I-O psychologists can relate to animals in the workplace.

To understand how animals fit into workplace dynamics, it is crucial to broaden our conceptualization of work. Traditionally, work has been narrowly defined as paid, intentional human activity, often tied to formal employment with written contracts. However, recent scholarship in labor studies and human-animal relations challenges this anthropocentric view, advocating for a more inclusive understanding. Work can be defined as the contribution of labor, whether cognitive, emotional, physical, or biological, toward the production, maintenance, or reproduction of value (Porcher & Schmitt, 2012).

This definition allows us to recognize animals as workers, not only when they perform visible service or assistance roles but also when their bodies themselves are the object and instrument of labor, such as in meat, dairy, and pharmaceutical industries. Reframing work in this way invites I-O psychologists to engage with the often-unseen labor of nonhuman agents. Moreover, animals are not passive tools but sentient beings with cognition, conscience, attitudes, and feelings (Challenger, 2023). Therefore, I-O psychologists should be concerned with animal workers in the same way they are concerned with human workers, as both contribute to work systems and are affected by the conditions under which they labor.

Animals working for humans

The primary argument of Hernandez et al. is that animals have long been used within workplaces, in various capacities and roles, such as livestock at farms, therapy animals, rescue dogs, or racing horses. Animals can be perceived as coworkers, who have feelings and attitudes, and as such are anthropomorphized, positioned akin to human beings, with feelings of joy, awe, compassion, or anxiety when integrated into the workplace. Such anthropomorphizing may be appropriate in the context of service dogs or truffle-hunting pigs but also overlooks another dimension of the role of

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animals in the workplace. For instance, although there are about 500,000 service dogs in the US (Dogster.com, 2025), there are about 87.2 million cattle and calves (USDA, 2025), 74 million hogs and pigs (Statista, 2023a), and 1.5 billion chickens (Statista, 2023b).

Most of these animals are meant for human consumption, and their purpose as “workers” is thus primarily to be slaughtered and consumed. Hence, although some animals (service dogs or therapy animals) can lead a life that may ensure positive feelings and attitudes, they only constitute an absolute minority in the total population of animals used as “workers.” In contrast, the destiny of most of all animals in workplaces is to be killed and eaten (see e.g., Animal Clock, 2025, for a live count of the number of animals killed in the US). This raises questions beyond the arguments of Hernandez et al. It is clear that assessments of how animals ought to be treated develop over time: many countries ban animals from circuses, based on the maltreatment of animals or other concerns about animal welfare. In this response, we offer a theoretical perspective on the basis of workplace dignity (Bal, 2017; Challenger, 2023) that informs understandings of how humans may relate to animals in the workplace and provide both theoretical and practical insights for further study and practice in I-O psychology.

Animal dignity and I-O psychology

Animal dignity is defined as the notion that animals have an intrinsic, inviolable worth that should be respected, protected, and promoted (Bal, 2017; Challenger, 2023). This implies that animals should have the ability to live as a member of one’s species. Animal dignity is based on the broader literature on workplace dignity (Bal, 2017). Building on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), presenting the dignity of each human being, a workplace dignity paradigm follows the rising pleas for the consideration of animal dignity (e.g., Persson et al., 2017), which opens up the possibility for many new perspectives and questions on the role of animals in the workplace.

Ecological philosophy (Challenger, 2023) shows how the attribution of dignity to humans is a product of human exceptionalism in which humans are perceived as outside of the natural world and order, which also allowed for the instrumental treatment of animals for human goals (as outlined above). An ecofeminist perspective (Challenger, 2023) problematizes the special status that humans have beyond animals and suggests that animals and humans are much more alike than different, or that humans are an animal species too, be it with some unique skills and characteristics yet also merely part of the natural world. One obvious distinction between animals and humans is that humans can affect the course of history and have a large impact on the lives of animals across the planet. Nonetheless, perhaps the resistance against attributing dignity to animals is partly based on a reluctance to admit the undignified ways many animals are treated in contemporary workplaces. Yet, an animal dignity lens supports better understanding of the most prevalent questions regarding the role of animals in the workplace.

Conceptualizing animal dignity

The intrinsic and inviolable worth as a property of animal dignity presumes that animals are worthy of respect and protection from humans (Bal, 2017). This also foregrounds the notion of power, as it is usually humans who hold power over animals. When humanity can incarcerate and breed billions of animals in the US alone, it raises questions about the dignity of these animals, both in terms of how they are treated and the dignity of their existence itself, when animals are bred massively merely to be consumed by humans. Therefore, the concept of animal dignity responds to such questions by introducing the intrinsic worth of animals (Challenger, 2023). Bal (2017) argues that ultimately, all humans and animals are dependent upon the planet for their

survival, and human economic activity is currently destroying the possibility for humans to survive on the planet (as indicated by climate change).

Animals play a crucial role here, both in terms of those animals kept for consumption (i.e., livestock-caused climate change) and animals living in the “wild,” whose habitats are increasingly endangered and reduced through human activity. The notion of animal dignity raises concerns about the relationship between humanity and the planet, the environment, and animals. Although currently animals are perceived as being purely instrumental to human needs (e.g., when bred for human consumption), an animal dignity perspective departs from the view of the inherent worth and status of each animal. In a dignity paradigm, the question is how humans can treat animals with dignity (Bal, 2017), which translates into questions about how the inherent worth of animals can be respected and form positive interspecies relations.

Although animal dignity may seem somewhat absurd in the context of the billions of animals annually slaughtered worldwide, it is more readily imaginable in the context of *pets*: Most people who have pets recognize the individuality of their pet, with their unique characteristics and personalities, and would not want to hurt or harm their pet animals. Few people would also eat their own pets, which would be an utterly undignified act. Hence, although respecting the dignity of pets may be inherent, the more hidden meat industry has little regard for animal dignity and has not integrated dignity concerns in relation to its functioning. At the same time, governments across the world, such as Switzerland and India, are introducing animal protection laws based on the argument that animals have rights and should be protected.

The dignity framework of Bal (2017) postulates two elements that are important in the context of dignity. First, dignity pertains to everything that exists on this planet including animals, whereas a relational duty-based approach argues that dignity is respected through the duties people perceive toward others. More specifically, Bal (2017) provides a relational perspective on dignity through arguing that dignity is respected through the duties felt from human beings to others, which are translated into action when people treat others with their inherent dignity. As nonhuman animals do not exist within frameworks of rights or duties, it is human beings that have to integrate this into their own behaviors and systems. Notably, researchers have suggested that stakeholder theory in organizations (and the accompanying theory of recognition) is useful in providing a model for more holistic understanding of nonhuman animals’ roles, functions, and rights (or lack thereof) in the workplace and further illustrates the responsibility of humans to treat animals with mutual respect and respect for autonomy and agency (Tallberg et al., 2022).

The second element in the dignity framework is the introduction of a staged model of dignity, in which stages build on each other in creating more dignified workplaces. Bal (2017) distinguished between four levels, including (a) violation prevention, (b) respect, (c) protection, and (d) promotion of dignity. The minimum level concerns the prevention of dignity violations. For many organizations, this may be the most immediately important level to act upon, in the necessity of prevention of animals to be violated in their dignity. For instance, many chicken farms have become industrial factories raising over 500,000 chickens annually, raising the question to what extent animal dignity is violated and how such violations could be prevented. However, building on violation prevention, organizations can work toward respecting animal dignity, actively protecting their dignity, and ultimately promoting greater animal dignity (Bal, 2017).

For instance, various governments are working toward regulation dictating farm animals to be able to live their lives in the most natural way, in a habitat that would resemble as closely as possible their natural ways of living (Mitchell & Hamilton, 2018). Keeping animals in such environments would be more respective of their dignity than keeping animals in small cages, while being force fed in order to grow quickly for human consumption. Although the question remains whether the killing of animals (for consumption) is justified, and how this relates to animal dignity, actions to include dignity for animals who are brought into workplaces may at least contribute to less violation and more respect.

Dignity research and practice

We postulate that a dignity framework (emphasizing organizational action and working in stages; Bal, 2017) provides at least three implications for I-O psychology, offering both theoretical and practical concerns about animal dignity.

First, the concept of animal dignity can be further investigated in workplaces. More specifically, this means that traditional concepts in I-O psychology can be investigated in relation to animal dignity. When animals are brought into the workplace, they may perform different roles, even though the large majority's role is to become a food source. Nonetheless, there are other roles for animals, including carrying out tasks not easily done by humans or robots, sources of entertainment, or as guinea pigs. Animals, like humans, possess knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that allow them to be unique contributors to their workplace. Therefore, if animals possess KSAOs that lead to or contribute in part to the success of the workplace, they should be treated with dignity and respect in a similar manner to humans.

Further research could investigate how organizations enact leadership processes, manage people and animals in the organization, and contribute to or deplete motivation, when animals are brought into the workplace. For instance, one research question would be how could organizations be organized and managed such they are protective of the dignity of animals? This necessitates better understandings of how animal dignity and well-being are affected when they become part of a commercial enterprise or used for commercial activities.

An animal dignity lens also presents difficult questions about the industry behind the global food supply system, where billions of animals are kept for human consumption. Research could elucidate how animals are treated in organizations and how their dignity is affected. Moreover, practically, organizations and policy makers can use animal dignity as a useful paradigm to organize the treatment of animals. Organizational structures, design, and practices could be focused on violation prevention, respecting, protecting, and the promoting of animal dignity. I-O psychologists may investigate how this organizational transformation is managed and experienced among people. This is important not only for animals but also for our future as humans.

A second way of investigating dignity is through focusing on dignity of people working with animals. For instance, therapy animals and guide dogs for people with disability may enhance the dignity of people who may struggle in life without the help of these animals. Although the previous recommendation focused on the dignity of animals themselves, here we focus on the dignity of people working with animals. For instance, guide dogs for visually impaired people may help them to lead a more dignified life, enabling them to be mobile. Another example concerns how pets that are literally brought into the workplace (e.g., offices) support a more friendly work environment, contributing to greater cohesion within organizations and, overall, strengthening bonds among people in organizations.

I-O psychology research could investigate how such roles for animals may affect the (experienced) dignity of people. However, human dignity could also be under threat among workers in slaughterhouses, where people have to deal with the mass killing of thousands or millions of animals (Tallberg & Jordan, 2022). In such cases, it is likely that people are experiencing dignity violations when confronted with such economic mechanisms of destruction. I-O psychologists can therefore also play an important role in investigating and supporting the well-being of people working with animals.

Finally, an animal dignity perspective may provide insights into the interactions between animals and humans. Since humans started to hunt animals for prey and domesticated animals on farms, humans have closely interacted with other animals. Although I-O psychology has refrained from directly engaging with animals, the history of work is connected to animals. Hence, interactions and relationships between humans and animals have been prevalent in work settings throughout history. I-O psychological research could also investigate the psychology of

interactions between animals and humans at work, and how or whether violations of dignity occur (Challenger, 2023). This focuses on the interaction itself, which may manifest dignity when both parties experience their dignity respected and protected (Bal, 2017). Many “traditional” concepts in I-O psychology, such as motivation, conflict, teamwork, selection, and leadership, could be applied to contexts where people work with animals and shed light on these concepts themselves as well as how they are indicative of human and animal dignity.

However, this should avoid the trap of anthropomorphizing animals, thereby projecting human needs, desires, and feelings upon animals and pretending that animals experience the same emotions and feelings as humans. Although a wagging tail may be interpreted as a sign of joy for dogs, researchers should be cautious about interpreting animal behavior through human terminology, such as emotion, affect, and motivation. However, in the interactions between humans and animals, dignity provides a framework for better understanding. When interactions are embedded within the active respecting of both animal and human dignity, it is more likely that dignity as such is respected. In the case of human–animal interaction whereby the interaction itself is merely meant to entertain humans, it is more likely that animal dignity is violated.

Further research in I-O psychology may elucidate such dynamics in greater detail. For practitioners and policy makers, dignity of the interactions where humans meet animals in an economic context should prevail when assessing the appropriateness of bringing animals into the workplace. Examples where farmers were exposed while beating cows or pigs with sticks to move them into transportation trucks show that it is the interaction of humans with animals where dignity may disintegrate into violence and abuse. It is precisely because of dignity violation that such behaviors are problematic, and therefore, a dignity lens elucidates the context that may prescribe dignified human–animal interactions. Moreover, recent scholars such as Köllen and Schneeberger (2023) propose that there should be a basic minimum moral standard for animals in the workplace because we as humans are responsible for the welfare of all entities in the workplace, including nonhuman animals. The basic minimum moral standard reflects the notion that animals in work settings should be protected from unnecessary suffering (Mellor, 2016).

Conclusion

This response to Hernandez et al. contributed to the research on animals in I-O psychology by offering a theoretical perspective on how animals can be conceptualized, studied, and treated in the workplace. We started by problematizing some features and explained that the overall majority of animals in the workplace are there to be killed for consumption. However, there are also other roles for animals, and a dignity paradigm offers new insights into how animal dignity can be conceptualized and how it informs our understanding of animal treatment in the workplace.

This poses difficult questions, for instance about how dignified it is to kill animals by billions each year. It also offers unique insights into how animals can be treated with more dignity, how human dignity can be enhanced through animals, and, finally, how encounters between animals and humans may provide dignity for both. We hope to encourage with this contribution more research in I-O psychology and better practice respectful of dignity for animals, humans, and the entire planet.

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