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Beyond Mead: Symbolic Interaction between Humans and Felines

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Recent research on the cognitive abilities and emotional capacities of animals has fueled the animal rights movement. This research has highlighted the differences between human and non-human animals. This debate has not been central to sociology, although Gerhard Mead's hard line between humans and animals by asserting that the latter were not capable of symbolic interaction. Sociologists are now questioning this assumption, and this article falls within this new line of research. We begin by presenting alternative views of symbolic interaction that allow for the possibility of such activity in non-human animals. We review recent research on symbolic interaction in cats and dogs, and we present our own research findings on human-feline interaction. We conclude that there is growing evidence that symbolic interaction is widely distributed throughout the animal kingdom, and that it enables animals to survive more effectively in human environments.

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