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Transgenic silences and ‘a feeling for the animal’: mouse ethics in laboratory practice

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From my photo album:





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Animal studies

Since 70's

Interdisciplinary – eg. the Humanimal
group

Interest in human-animal relations

Different degrees of engagement in "the
animal question"



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Human relations with other animals

Always contradictory

Historically and culturally contingent

Species specific – the relation as the unit of analysis

Conflictual, power relations

"Social glue"



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Dilemmas with transgenic animals

Two case studies: Animal ethics committees and laboratory actors in Sweden

Ethnography & interviews: 40 ethics committee members, researchers and animal technicians



Theoretical framework

Science studies and animal studies:

Animal experimentation is *dilemmatic*, and consequently has to be handled in talk and practice. How is this done concerning transgenic affairs?

"Doing ethics" perspective, focusing on articulation of both explicit and indirect dilemmas.



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Main research questions:

- How is the production and research on transgenic animals managed and authorized by actors involved in research and ethics committees?
- What social (including risk and safety), ethical and cultural dilemmas get articulated and what become neglected?



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Part I: Transgenic silences

Transgenic organisms are at once completely ordinary and the stuff of science fiction. (Donna J Haraway)





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Transgenic mice as “ordinary exclusivities”

The transgenes are presented as - on the one hand – any other animals and transgenic affairs as business as usual, and – on the other hand – exclusive and different, which creates a space for *transgenic silences*.



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TRANSGENIC ANIMALS AS *NORMAL* (1):

*You have the dilemma
I have seen that the
mice I have are so
immensely normal, I
look carefully for the
smallest deviance and
I don't find a thing.
(Interview research
leader)*

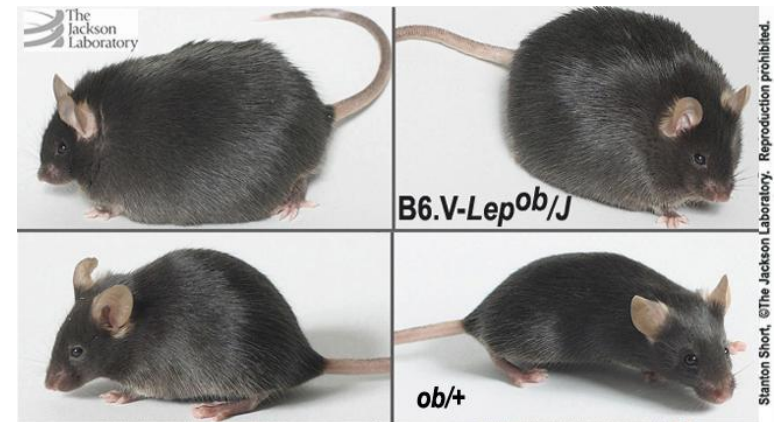




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TRANSGENIC ANIMALS AS *NORMAL* (2):

*If you have two cages,
one with wild types or
ordinary animals, and
one with transgenic
white mice – you can
not tell the difference.
[...] They eat normally,
they live normally, and
they breed normally
(Interview researcher)*





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NATURE HAS ALWAYS BEEN DOING IT:

The difference from spontaneous mutations is that now we are speeding up the process. That's really the only difference. (Interview researcher)





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HUMANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DOING IT:

We humans have domesticated animals for thousands of years and changed their behaviour through selective breeding. [...] This extra thing we do in the lab, I don't consider it ethically problematic. (Interview researcher).



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TG *BETTER* THAN OTHER BREEDING FORMS:

If you change the genetic make up so that... the phenotype of the animal is not feeling well, or doesn't survive in the long run or so, then of course it is unpleasant for that animal. It has to be. But that does not only concern experimental animals, you have the debate about Belgian blue, for example, these large meat cattle which in itself are not genetically modified but bred that way. (Interview researcher)



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TRANSGENIC ANIMALS AS HOPE (1):

If we can create a drug which uses this gene product, then we can help all people with this disease, it could be Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's disease, so this kind of knowledge is extremely critical. [...] So, because of this it is so... precisely this with genetics and animal models are so awfully important. And it was rewarded with the Nobel prize. (Interview research leader)



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TRANSGENIC ANIMALS AS HOPE (2):

*Medical progress has often not happened when you have looked for it intentionally. [...] You don't know the outcome. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps cure for all diabetics in the whole world. Millions of people can be benefited from it.
(Interview research leader)*





Transgenic silences

- Risk of suffering; unexpected phenotypes, breeding, number of animals etc.
- Human agency and the role of technology
- Instrumentalization and objectification of animals (AND subjectification)
- The "trans"-thing



Part II: A feeling for the animal

- Handling animals – embodied practices
- Loving animals – being an animal friend
- Killing well



Working with animals (1):

T: What's the difference then [between mice and rats]?

F: Well, I don't know... really what the difference is. It's probably just that you think since they are larger, then maybe. Perhaps you handle them in a different... you know, we lift the rats with the body all the time.

T: Mm.

F: The mice are lifted by the tail. (Interview animal technician Fia)





Working with animals (2):

So, I have a small tendency of becoming little too much of a mate. The, it depends how long they are at the unit. But the rats I deal with today, they sit for quite a while with me, my breeding males and the like. I do get an amazing touch with them. [...] but, I think it... in a way it's a good thing too. Because then you do some... little extra. You should feel this empathy. [...] I think you ought to feel with the animal all the time. (Interview animal technician Ingrid, p. 3)



Killing well:

T: If you, if you could choose, which euthanasia method would do you prefer?

P: [pause]

T: I assume you're the one who does it?

P: Mm. I probably prefer almost to decapitate.

T: Why is that?

P: Because it is the quickest. If you have well-handled animals you experience that they never get the time to react, before it's over. They are used to being handled, that you pick them, that they... go to different equipments and the like, so it seldom... bothers them.

(Interview researcher Pernilla, p. 12)



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'A feeling for the animal' (1)

Working *with* – both emotional and material, bodily dimensions

Empathy – an experimental ethos

Killing well – measures of care, personal and technological refinement and division of labour



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'A feeling for the animal' (2)

*Corporeal compassion
and symphysis*
(Acampora)

Sharing suffering
(Haraway)

Affective dimensions
of laboratory work





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