
Attitudes toward animals among African American women in Los Angeles¹

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INTRODUCTION

Metropolitan populations of the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. This growing urban demographic diversity is due to high levels of immigration from Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the world over the last two decades, as well as long-standing patterns of rural to urban migration among native-born African Americans and Hispanic Americans. One seldom noticed aspect of this rising diversity relates to nature/society relationships. Our research seeks to clarify relationships between cultural background (linked to race/ethnicity or national origin) and nature-society relations. In particular, we wish to explore the ways in which attitudes toward animals are formed, and the role of cultural difference in shaping attitude formation. To this end, we designed and conducted a series of focus groups in Los Angeles, California. Focus groups allow participants to express their ideas in a relatively unconstrained fashion, and to react to one another's statements. Thus this technique is well suited to the task of clarifying issues of culture and race/ethnicity, and the socio-economic contexts of attitude formation.

Since prior research indicates significant gender and class differences in attitudes toward animals, we restricted our focus groups to relatively homogeneous participants: within each group members were low-income inner city women. Groups differed from each other primarily along lines of race/ethnicity and immigrant status.

In this paper, we describe and analyze a single focus group involving eleven low-income African-American women living in central Los Angeles. In addition to drawing on prior studies of African-American attitudes toward animals and the environ-

ment, our interpretation of the focus group discussion is based on identifying attitudes, the arguments that participants selected to support or refute them, and how these arguments fit in the elaboration of distinct cultural models of attitudes. Also participants provided us narratives and anecdotes about the cultural and social meanings of animals and of the human activities that relate to them. Altogether we obtained a rich sampling of attitudes and practices.

The paper is organized into four sections. First, we briefly describe our focus group participants, and the logistical and analytic procedures used. Next, we characterize participant practices and interactions with animals and their knowledge and perceptions of animals, in order to understand the role of animals in their lives. Third, we explore their values toward nature in general and animals in particular, through questions about how animals should or should not be treated. Finally we explore attitudes in relation to the participants' particular socio-cultural background, and on the basis of these findings, we suggest a cultural model of attitude formation that includes the role of racialization in shaping attitudes toward animals.

SAMPLE AND ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

The women who participated in the focus group varied most among one another in terms of their age and education (see Table 1). Half were born in Los Angeles and most had lived there for quite some time. In terms of family experience, most described having parents who fished and/or hunted and about

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half whose parents farmed. Most had also kept pets. Discussants were asked a range of questions about their general environmental beliefs, traditional forms of human-animal interaction, attitudes toward animals, and knowledge, perceptions and behavioral interaction patterns. Focus group members responded in an uneven fashion depending on the question and trajectory of discussion. While some members remained conspicuously absent from most of the conversation, others tended to be well represented throughout the conversation, — extended narrative was regularly provided by four discussants.

The group discussion was tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using QSR NUD*IST, a qualitative, non-numerative research program designed for textual and narrative analysis. Text was coded for a particular conceptual 'node', which together constitute the structure of an 'index tree' (Figure 1). In our particular case, nodes tended to fall into one of three 'umbrella' categories: practices, perceptions and knowledge, and values and attitudes.

ANIMAL PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS: SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT, FAMILY HISTORIES, AND INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

Discussions about animal practices generated the richest commentary, the most intense debate, and the most in-depth historical narratives of the focus group. Many recounted vivid experiences with animals like pets for instance. The women typically relied on first hand experience for understanding animals, as sentient beings for instance, as well as second hand information from parents, family or friends, and nature books and urban folktales.

Interestingly, most of the discussion on practices revolved around animal (meat) consumption, including individual and family practices and perceptions, practices of other cultures and the perceptions of those practices, the history of animal consumption, both household and as a cultural practice. For instance, there were stories of one participant's whose father had worked in a slaughterhouse, another father who once killed a neighbor's pesky opossum and served him up for supper, and a grandmother who regularly wrung the chickens' necks and cooked the bird for family dinner. Within the general rubric of animal consumption, the conversation ranged from individual and family consumption practices to those of other cultures, from gendered and cultural knowledge to consideration of cultural and ethnic survival, from the most mundane and innocuous family narratives

(e.g., raising worms to use as fishing bait) to historical accounts of the significance of animal consumption to household and cultural persistence. The strongest theme that emerged was the necessity to eat meat — often of animals or animal parts devalued by mainstream white society — in order to survive. The general rationale that meat is necessary to survive is a common psychological mechanism for enabling humans to harm animals while still seeing themselves as compassionate (Plous 1993), but one that carries particular force for African-Americans given their historical and contemporary oppression. Their perspectives from the margin also allowed them to view the animal practices of other cultural groups with understanding rather than condemnation, despite the conflict between such practices and their own forms of animal consumption.

INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES: INFLUENCES OF GENERATION AND PLACE

The practice of meat consumption by the focus group members was framed in the following ways: 1) what was explicitly or implicitly *eaten*; 2) what was explicitly or implicitly *not eaten*; 3) what constitutes 'appropriate' meat and/or consumable animal in an (African) American context; and 4) what does not. The social and cultural construction of (food) animals and of the parts therein (e.g., gizzards, tripe, etc.) emerged as a fascinating topic and one that the discussants themselves dealt with historically, thoughtfully, and critically.

Individual eating practices often were offered in list-like fashion, with discussants often presenting experiences they considered most extraordinary, surprising (to the other group members and to themselves), or daring. The following is an example:

Bernadette: Frog legs ... I've eaten snake, ... shark ...

Vivian: Shark. I don't care too much for octopus.

Irene: Shark. Shark is good.

Susan: I've had octopus before.

In this exchange, snake, shark, octopus, and frog legs appear to be constructed in ways emphasizing their qualities as fashionable consumption item similar to swordfish, duckling, and, increasingly, deer meat (i.e., venison). Perhaps significantly, the four women engaged in this discussion were either Los Angeles natives or had spent the greater part of their adult lives in the area. This list of exotic animals was immediately preceded by another very

different list, older and more 'rural' in character. The women brought up in rural settings initiated this discussion. Frankie, who was spent most of her life in Alabama, raised the subject of subsistence hunting, and Alice, reared in rural Texas, joins in a discussion of the hunting, preparation, and consumption of jackrabbits, squirrels, opossum. These animals are commonly eaten by many African American families in the rural south. In a fascinating study of hunting culture in rural North Carolina, Marks (1991) finds that such so-called 'trash' animals have long been a default form of protein for many local African Americans due to the sequestration of 'legitimate' game animals (e.g., deer, partridge, quail, etc.) by local, often wealthy, white hunting clubs. Animals like opossum, 'coon', and squirrel are generally considered vermin by the dominant Euro-American ideology, more often recognized as roadkill than as something prepared for dinner.

The younger participants, raised in cities, clearly did not identify with those women whose families hunted and/or consumed such animals. They consistently used distancing mechanisms in their speech (i.e. *they* eat opossum; emphasis added), for example. What appears, then, is a rural-urban split defined on the basis of animal consumption: opossum, 'coon', and squirrel are conceptually linked to an impoverished, rural, African American community whose dietary needs are supplied by hunting certain game animals and whose access to a normative urban diet is limited. The African American 'move' to the city and subsequent development of an urban consciousness have broken the rural shackles, however. These women are no longer obligated to participate in eating habits that may be considered culturally backwards, emancipating them from the diet of a violent, impoverished and oppressed rural past when 'we' were poor, 'we' were rural, and 'we' were slaves, forced by necessity to eat 'trash' animals.

SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES: LEGACIES OF SLAVERY AND MARGINALITY

Just as opossum, 'coon', jackrabbit, and squirrel were conceptually linked to a rural, impoverished African American diet and socio-cultural context, so too were organ meats (e.g., tripe, heart, chitlins, liver, etc.). Alice especially, emphasized the link between eating animal organ meats and survival. She talked about her father who worked in a rural California slaughterhouse, and his contribution to family well-being. 'Nearly every day he would bring home a bucket of meat that the slaughterhouse didn't want:

chitlins, tripe, the things they charge you a fortune for now. Chitlins, tripe, the stomach, sweetbreads ...' These organs were (and in some cases still are) considered 'trash', vulgar, and disgusting by white America, much like the 'trash' animals hunted in the rural South. And yet, organ meat became a dietary staple – indeed a necessity for survival – for black slaves seldom provided with sufficient food:

Alice: The reasons blacks know how to eat chitlins and all the things that are repulsive in an animal is that we learned it from slavery because we had little to eat.

Vivian: We took whatever was left, and what they (white slaveowners) didn't know how to prepare or they couldn't stomach, that's what they gave the slaves to eat. So we acquired that taste.

Despite its obvious significance to African American culture and survival during the period of slavery in this country (as described by Vivian and Alice), the consumption of organ meat, like hunting 'trash' animals, seems to be losing some of its cultural significance in today's largely urban context. Indeed, many of the participants were completely unfamiliar with certain popular organ meats; Bernadette admitted to not knowing what 'sweetbreads' were, while Laura mistakenly described them as pastry ('It's bread. That's all it is.'). Nevertheless, organ meat and animals such as opossum, 'coon', and squirrel ('all the things that are repulsive' to white society) appear to maintain an important and critical place in the history of African American culture, not only as cultural artifact (e.g., 'we acquired that taste') but as symbols of survival, resistance, perseverance, ingenuity, and cultural/ethnic pride. As Alice claimed: 'We (African slaves) were creative, we learned ... and we ate what the white people didn't want.'

CROSS-CULTURAL ANIMAL PRACTICES

The dietary practices of other cultures in the Los Angeles area were debated, critiqued, and defended by the focus group members. Focusing almost entirely on dog eating practiced by many southeast Asian cultures, this topic, interestingly and significantly, emerged within the context of 'trash' animal consumption by blacks in this country's rural landscapes. Indeed, the topic was initiated by Vivian with the phrase, '[S]ince you mentioned the opossum ...'. Discussion of dog-eating primarily focused on the revulsion of one young woman, Susan, on the

one hand, and on the other, an effort to contextualize the practice as culturally legitimate by Alice, Frankie, Vivian, and Georgia:

- Susan: That's (dog eating) horrible. That's disgusting.
- Frankie: ... That's the same way we feel about eating slaughtering goats and cows and chickens. The same way we feel; it's all meat and we gonna eat anything.
- Susan: That ain't no meat. That's not meat for us to eat.
- Frankie: That's not what we see it as ...
- Alice: That attitude is part of their culture.
- Susan: Dogs is (sic) not meant for us to eat.
- Georgia: ... They eat dogs because that's a part of their culture but it's very hard for us to adapt to because we have always considered dogs as pets ...
- Susan: Dogs *are* pets (emphasis in original). That's wrong, that's wrong.
- Georgia: ... If you were brought up eating (dog), it would be just fine ... It's like if you would eat a chicken ...
- Vivian: But you know ... the difference ... (between chicken and dog). I mean, you were born in the United States.

The arguments of Susan, a young Los Angeles native (whose economic means may be greater than the other focus group members) center entirely on the 'western' construction of 'dog' as pets not intended for human consumption. Juxtaposed to her arguments are those of Alice, Frankie, Georgia, and Vivian who comprehend the Asian construction of 'dog' not as pet, but (in certain instances) as food. By providing Susan with examples of how western society constructs animals as food (e.g., chickens, goats, cows, etc.), these women shed a more culturally empathetic light upon Asian consumptive practices. Vivian goes so far as to detail the consumption of horse meat in parts of the United States, consciously using an animal whose popular construction in American culture maintains a privileged position along with that of the dog. Susan herself reinforces this contradiction, using the example of kangaroos ("They had kangaroo meat at Jack-in-the-Box before ... I swear. It was on the news a long time

ago."), and Alice mentions ostrich consumption.

Unsurprisingly, Alice, Frankie, and Vivian maintain positions of cultural empathy, understanding, and contextuality in the case of Asian dog eating practices; to do otherwise would undermine fundamentally their earlier statements concerning the consumption of repulsive 'trash' animals and organ meat by their own culture. Again, the position appears to revolve around the notion of cultural survival, in which there is an historical negotiable 'place' for pets as well as for consumable animals that is culturally, socially, politically, economically and geographically mediated. The cultural placement of animals into one category or another (or for that matter, into any of several other categories of animal, e.g., beasts of burden, wildlife, game, etc.) is an historical process that, in the African American context, was powerfully mediated through the processes of oppression, violence, and neglect.

Cultural categorization is, therefore, *a priori* legitimate and demanding of 'our' appreciation, understanding, and acceptance lest racism based on consumption become manifest (Emel and Wolch 1995). During a discussion of Mayan practices of eating iguanas, turtles, and other animals uncommon in western diets, Alice goes so far as to suggest that cannibalism could be legitimate if cultural or individual survival is at stake. This leads Susan to claim that food is entirely relative to culture and situation:

Alice: I don't want to offend any of my people by reminding them but in Africa they used to [eat] human beings ... and they ate their enemies. When they killed their enemies they ate, they took great pleasure in eating their enemies ...

Susan: Anything is edible. Everything, even you all. Everything edible. We're edible, animals are edible, everything is edible, huh? People will eat just any old thing.

VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ANIMALS

The small number of prior studies of attitudes toward animals among African-Americans, and research on African-American attitudes toward the environment more generally, suggest that their views are slightly more anthropocentric and especially utilitarian than those of whites (see Kellert and Berry 1980). However there is substantial evidence that these attitudes reflect socio-economic and cultural factors (Kellert 1984, Dolin 1988, Caron - Sheppard 1995) or question bias (Dolin 1988) rather

than a lack of concern for nature or animals (Caron 1989). Moreover, there is also evidence of change over time (Caron - Sheppard 1995).

For the women in this group, attitudes toward animals were expressed throughout discussions of many topics, most linked to normative questions of how humans should or should not use animals. Two basic attitudinal (or cultural) models emerged from the general discussion. The first being an *anthropocentric* model that emphasized utilitarianism (someone might say: 'humans must use animals to survive'). Perhaps the strongest advocate of an anthropocentric, utilitarian perspective was Alice, who justified her attitudes in part on the need to use animals in the competitive struggle for survival:

Alice: When we were living in (a rural town) my father found this beautiful black and white dog, Benjamin. And we had chickens, and a chicken coop, a chicken house, and Benjamin would suck eggs. And about the fourth or fifth time daddy caught him sucking eggs, daddy took a two-by-four and hit, hit (sic) the little dog with it ...

She goes on to describe how their second dog injured the neighbor's son:

Alice: About two or three days later, the dog came up missing and we didn't understand it at the time but, of course, that father killed that dog ... So that's, I think that's why I don't, I'm very sure about animals being inferior to humans and that humans come first because animals have always been our servants ... I don't remember even ever being concerned with animals.

The story is illuminating on several counts, but especially because it shows that for Alice's father at least, household survival was of immediate consequence and consumable animals and their products (e.g., eggs) played a critical role to the family's well being. In times of resource constraints, cultural constructions of a pet for example become more highly negotiable.

This was one of the more striking example of utilitarianism but other anthropocentric views also emerged, in particular negativism ('some animals are pests'), the spiritual value of animals to humans ('animals have supernatural powers to help or harm people'), and an animal welfare view that humans had responsibilities to animals because of their

similarities to people ('people should help animals in distress because they suffer just like humans').

The second attitudinal model to emerge was a *biocentric* model. And this was important because biocentric attitudes were not necessarily predicated on the basis of past research, in fact, such attitudes were found to be weak among African Americans. But they were expressed swiftly in our focus group discussion. For example, Alice was promptly challenged in her resolutely anthropocentric, utilitarian stand by several other participants who articulated biocentric attitudes.

Vivian: I don't think we can have that kind of control.

Georgia: I don't think we should. That's not even fair.

Irene: Weren't they here before us? The animals? So, you know, actually they were here first. God made them first, all right.

Alice: No, man is just a little lower than God. Man is just a little lower than the angels!

Irene: We don't have, God put the animals there. We don't have any right just to take them out, because ...

Alice: Man is the ruler of all things.

Irene: Well, this world is big enough for everybody to share.

Vivian: If they would only start sharing ...

Irene: We don't have any right to take out these animals because they were here before we were. Period. They have their life too.

Variants of biocentric attitudes included naturalistic perspectives that stressed animals as part of nature ('animals should not be harmed for their natural behavior'). They also involved an animal rights standpoint ('animals have a right to existence'). A third and related biocentric view was that people should coexist with animals and emphasized the need for human-animal coexistence on the basis of fairness to animals and their prior claims to territory.

As mentioned, several women, across all age groups, also articulated biocentric animal-rights attitudes that emphasized human responsibility to help wild animals in distress, threatened by starvation or other harm, just as they would humans in similar circumstances. Only Vivian voiced a fatalistic position, on religious grounds: "Well, that's nature.

That's an act of God. Man can't do anything about [it]" – but even she considered it appropriate for humans to help relieve animal distress in some fashion later on. Others emphasized assistance because they were other creatures with whom we share the planet. This perspective appeared to be a projection of anti-racist attitudes, into a normative guideline for human-animal relations:

- Norma: An animal is an animal and if they need our help, well, you know, we should help them.
- Georgia: Right. Just like humans, they're all different, we're all different in some ways.
- Norma: In some ways, but, you know, we stay people.
- Georgia: In some ways, but I would rush to help you. I would, I mean, you know ...
- Norma: Black, white, purple.
- Georgia: Yeah. So why wouldn't I rush to help like a goose, a lion ...
- Carla: Animals are just like human.

DISCUSSION: ATTITUDINAL CONFLICT AND CULTURAL MODELS OF PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

The main themes to emerge from our discussion with the African American women in the focus group highlight the roles of generational and class position, urban/rural background, and membership in an historically oppressed and currently marginalized social group. These socio-cultural contexts shaped personal identities, everyday practices, and values/attitudes, including their perspectives on animals and appropriate human-animal relations. Both anthropocentric and biocentric attitudes quickly emerged in the discussion, along with a number of other, less commonly articulated attitudes.

How can we make sense of the fundamental conflict between the dominant attitudes articulated by the focus group participants – anthropocentric utilitarianism and biocentric views? For our group, resolution was achieved by segmenting the animal world into three categories: 'food', 'pet', and 'wildlife'. 'Food' animals were simply necessary for survival; people simply had to distance themselves from their unfortunate fate. In the case of pets and wild animals, however, the human-animal divide

became permeable, and similarities between humans and animals demanded care and compassion and legitimized animal rights. These socially constructed categories were not rigidly defined or mutually exclusive, but rather depended upon time, place and situation. Indeed, as the discussion of cross-cultural practices above indicates, these categories were readily discerned as relative and culture-bound. Moreover, the distinctions can be breached, as hinted by some of the comments such as that of Susan on slaughtered animals crying "just like humans" (a sympathy continued later by Norma). But in general, the suffering of pets or wildlife appears fundamentally different from killing for consumptive purposes, engaging emotions, sympathies, and values that become manifest in human-animal analogies. Indeed, the following comment by Bernadette rings of an almost 'maternal' quality: "... Help the animal(s) ... Take care of them. You know, nurse (them) back to health and let (them) go."

Particularly for urban residents distanced from subsistence hunting, pets and wild animals can be seen as standing on the boundaries of humanity. For example, animals identified in the question about whether humans should intervene to help animals in distress due to natural causes were (in order) whales, seals, birds, and fish, each framed explicitly and implicitly as 'wildlife', a category which carries with strong socio-cultural, even political images and understandings. Suffering 'wildlife' may be interpreted or imagined in such contexts as a suffering earth, a suffering innocence, a suffering outsider group (such as African Americans); its rescue as a chance at redemption.

Thus certain practices are appropriate for specific social, cultural and, significantly, *ideological* constructions, and practices are mediated by the values and attitudes inherent within such constructions. Suffering 'wildlife' or 'pets' legitimize sympathy and rescue, while the suffering of 'food' animals is considered an unfortunate but necessary externality and not of sufficient consequence to change behavior. However, as demonstrated by Susan's strong comments about the suffering of 'food' animals, the breaking down or dissolution of the barriers inherent to cultural constructions is possible.

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Table 1. Participants Profiles

Participant	Age	L.A. Residency in years (followed by city/state of birth)	Education	Type of animal experience
Bernadette	52	37 (Richmond, CA)	High School	None
Georgia	22	3 (Belize)	High School	Farm, stable, pets
Vivian	48	Native	Some college	Pet
Carla	50	Native	High School	None
Susan	25	Native	College Degree	Farm
Denise	75	30 (New York City, NY)	High School	Pets
Irene	28	13 (Colorado)	< High School	Pets
Frankie	22	9 (Alabama)	Some College	Farm, stable, pets
Alice	64	33 (Texas)	College degree	Farm, pets
Laura	26	Native (arrived before 1 year old)	< High School	Pets
Norma	25	Native	< High School	Pets

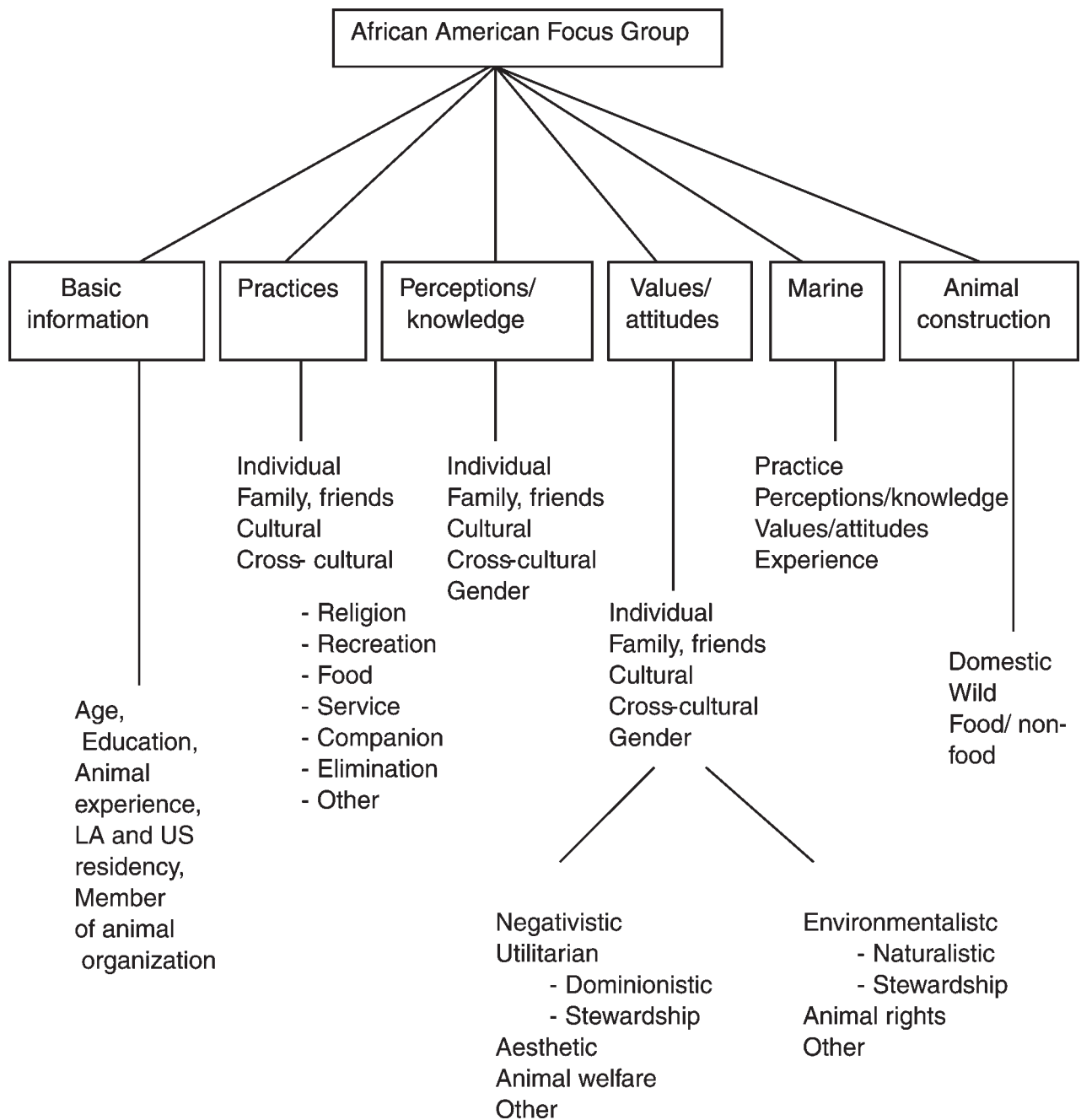


Figure 1. Coding Tree