

# A Roadmap for Collaboration between Animal Rights Advocates and Psychological Scientists

From [Jared Piazza, The Society for the Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations PHAIR](#)

December 2022

*Best practice would be for animal rights advocates and psychological scientists to fully consider these kinds of issues ahead of time and come to a transparent agreement about how they would be handled during their collaboration. Our idea was to generate a document that could guide people at the outset of this kind of work.*



Cover photo credit: [Linda Robert](#)

A brief interview with Professor Chris Hopwood, Editor-in-chief of the [PHAIR Journal](#), about the history and purpose of the ‘roadmap for collaboration’ available [here](#).

**What is the brief history of this document? What motivated its production, how did it come together, and who has been involved?**

A few years ago, I started consulting on a project with Courtney Dillard and Andie Thompkins from [Mercy For Animals](#) (MFA) to conduct survey data on attitudes about farmed animals and plant-based foods across 23 countries. During our work together, it became clear to me that there are important differences in the way academics like me and advocates like Courtney and Andie approach our work. This collaboration has been wonderful for me so far, and hopefully MFA has also seen it as a success. However, there were some differences in perspective along the way that I wished I had considered ahead of time.

For instance, my practice is to always post all my materials, data, and script for other researchers to access, use, and check my work, but there are obvious reasons why this is not advisable in an advocacy context. Another example is that the outlets that are most impactful for scientists (peer-reviewed journals like [PHAIR](#)) are not the same as the outlets that are most impactful for advocates (more publicly visible blogs, social media, and targeted communications to members), and this can affect the way studies are conducted and how the results are written up. These are not things I really thought fully about before beginning this project with MFA, but I spent a lot of time thinking about them during our work together.

Courtney, Andie, and I agreed that it might be helpful to the field for us to try to parse these kinds of issues and to encourage productive advocacy-science collaboration more generally. We enlisted two colleagues who we knew would have significant experience and good ideas about this – Andrea Polanco from [Faunalytics](#) and Chris Bryant from [Bryant Research](#). Together, the five of us generated a draft that aimed to:

- define important terms related to advocacy-science collaboration,
- distinguish the relative strengths of advocates/advocacy organizations and scientists/universities,
- highlight some challenges that can come into advocacy-science collaboration,
- describe principles and best practices, and
- provide a few salient examples.

We solicited feedback from members of the animal advocacy research community and got a lot of great ideas. We also presented this draft at the [Animal Advocacy Conference](#) in Kent this summer, and got very helpful feedback from the attendees about our own blind spots, some issues to cover or emphasize, and other ways to improve the document. We used this feedback to revise the document into the version that is currently posted at <https://phairsociety.org/advocacy-science-collaboration/>.

**What is the aim of the document and what is your hope for how academics and advocates will use it?**

Best practice would be for animal rights advocates and psychological scientists to fully consider these kinds of issues ahead of time and come to a transparent agreement about how they would be

handled during their collaboration. Our idea was to generate a document that could guide people at the outset of this kind of work.

### **What do you see are the main benefits of scientists and advocates working together?**

The underlying idea of this project was that there are considerable benefits to animal rights advocates and psychological scientists working together. Collaboration can help both psychological scientists and advocates.

One thing I have struggled with most of my career, like most of my colleagues, is the nagging existential question about whether I am spending my time doing anything useful. My mid-career turn towards research on human-animal intergroup relations largely reflects an attempt to have a real impact. But to fulfil whatever potential I might have, I needed to go beyond conducting studies whose end goal is publication in peer-reviewed journals to figuring out what kind of research would be most helpful. Nobody knows more about what kind of research is needed than the people who are trying to apply research in their day-to-day work. Psychological researchers like me can therefore learn a lot about the kinds of research questions to ask by working closely with advocates.

Conversely, we believe advocacy will be most impactful to the extent that it is based on evidence. Of course, there are many ways to define impact and evidence, and we hope to have been inclusive of different perspectives in our approach. Across different approaches, the careful application of scientific methods increases rigor and confidence in any findings, and psychological scientists therefore have expertise that can be helpful to advocates.

One example that has been preoccupying me lately is the question of how effective meat reduction interventions that use psychological techniques to target individual behavior change are. There have been a few review papers published in the last couple of years listing the various factors that ostensibly make these kinds of interventions effective (e.g., see [Harguess et al., 2020](#); [Kwasny et al., 2022](#); [Mathur et al., 2021](#)). These papers may give advocates the impression that they should be using such techniques in their work. However, I am skeptical: meat reduction intervention studies typically:

- measure attitudes rather than actual behavior change,
- they rarely include meaningful follow-ups,
- there are few replications,
- and I am concerned about selective reporting or “publication bias” (studies that find an effect are more likely to have been published than studies that don’t).

In general, my observation is that the more rigorous a study is, the less likely a robust effect is found. This concerns me, because it raises the possibility that advocacy groups are using valuable resources on interventions that may appear to have some evidence and efficacy based on a review of the literature, even though the evidence is pretty thin. People whose day jobs are on the ground doing actual advocacy cannot be expected to deconstruct the scientific literature or design the kinds of studies that can rigorously test intervention hypotheses. This is where psychological scientists can help.

### **What are some of the major challenges to collaboration?**

We outline several domains of challenge in the document, including:

- **Bias.** For instance, there may be anti-scientific bias among certain people in the advocacy community, who have a strong intuitive sense that what they are doing is right and should be effective. Conversely, there is a risk that researchers doing research on this politically-tinged topic may be perceived by other academics as biased.
- **Tensions regarding goals and values.** Advocates are generally interested in changing the world to be better as quickly as possible. Scientists are generally interested in learning about the nature of the world, and this usually involves a lot of mulling, replicating, and reconsidering. In many cases, advocacy proceeds by moving forward with the best information available, whereas science is generally most productive if progress is cautious and slow. As an example: From my scientific perspective, we do not have strong evidence that meat reduction interventions are an effective use of resources. But what is an advocate to do, throw up their hands and stop trying things until better evidence is available?
- **Communication.** Both the way we communicate with one another and with outside groups. To one another: the norms about roles and expectations within a collaboration may differ so much that you do not see them coming. It is naturally best to clarify these differences ahead of time. Outside: scientists tend not to be as good at explaining the relevance of our findings to the public as advocates. This is a great example of why it can be so fruitful for us to work together.

#### **Where can interested readers find the document?**

The document is posted on the PHAIR Society website at <https://phairsociety.org/advocacy-science-collaboration/>.

If you have any thoughts, comments, or suggestions, please share them with me, Chris Hopwood, at [chopwoodmsu@gmail.com](mailto:chopwoodmsu@gmail.com).

For further discussion of the roadmap, check out [this blog post](#) by Faunalytics.