

Data Exemplar for use with:

Encounters With Dogs as an Exercise in Analysing Multi-Species Ethnography

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Included are three forms of data from the same setting at various stages of the analysis process. The first are the initial rough fieldnotes taken by Samantha whilst conducting participant observation in the Sri Ranganatha temple, one of three temples at the Skanda Vale ashram in west Wales. The second are expanded notes with thick description of the same encounter. The third is a selected section of writing combining reflexive analysis of the thick description with some relevant theoretical connections incorporating both human and canine perspectives, also known as multi-species ethnography

Dataset Exemplar

Stage 1

Original ‘rough’ fieldnotes (written in notebook immediately after these interactions occurred and while I was still in situ):

Crazy paving day 2. Sri Ranganatha temple. Unbearably hot. Joined by Shakti – thirsty, drank my cement mixing water, then came over for scratches. Overwhelmed by how much I miss Max. First time I have touched another dog since his death. Strong mnemonic (smell, touch – do Bernese Mountain Dogs have double coat too? Felt like it ...). She seemed to recognise something was up. Very much a person like Max. Cried and made her fur damp. She stayed with me ’til I stopped crying, then went to entrance and lay down. So hot. How does she cope in here? Why does she come inside? And the incense? Need to look into canine olfaction and hearing ... Would dogs find the pujas stressful (incense and bell ringing – loud and smelly)?! What about animals in temples? Common in south Asia. I like being in here despite the heat – meditative, calming. Good place for seva, or is it if I get something in return? Is enjoying the work contrary to selfless service? Swami N came back. Explained purification by water. Shakti polluting? Remembered Maya’s comment. He thought it funny, didn’t seem to take offence. Said she lived up to her name. Isn’t Shakti divine mother? Should have asked him! He wants to breed a litter (and said I could maybe have one of the pups which was exciting!!! Then felt guilty about Max – am I ready for another dog yet ...?). Talked more about Max and Shakti (and his former husky). Swami went to check my crazy paving

(I was worried the cement was too sandy) and I carried on trying to talk to him, forgetting he usually reads lips, wanting to ask about reincarnation and hierarchy of species versus individuals. Felt stupid when realised he couldn't hear me. Made me wonder if he is drawn to Shakti because of his hearing – non-verbal communication (but didn't ask, it felt too personal/intrusive, maybe broach it tomorrow depending on how the conversation goes?). But also wondered about comfort of being able to live closely with another being in a monastic community (with emphasis on separation/focus on relationship with god) ...? Shakti sniffed air then almost immediately we heard barks – did she smell him coming? Marmaduke dragging Brother D along track, typical hound on a scent! But is he 'typical hound'? Not all hounds the same. Is Shakti a 'typical' Bernese Mountain Dog? Need to check the breed characteristics. But also important to emphasise individuals as per Ingold's 'biosocial becoming'. Remember to ask Swami B and others during interviews later about reincarnation and animals ...

Stage 2

Expanded fieldnotes/thick description (written when I was back in my accommodation, approx. 1 hour after leaving the temple):

Shakti, a large Bernese Mountain Dog, entered the temple and padded over to where I had been hard at work laying crazy paving slabs on the temple floor. The corrugated plastic roof overhead amplified what, outside, was a glorious summer's day, and made the ambient temperature inside the temple almost unbearably hot. I sat back on my heels, and wiping the concrete dust from my sweaty face rose slowly to my feet as she approached, surprised that such a hirsute creature would enter this space of her own volition. For a moment I flattered myself with the possibility that she had come to say hello. Her true motivation was soon revealed however, as while she acknowledged me with a sidelong glance and the faintest wag of her heavy tail as she walked past, she didn't stop walking until she had reached the bucket of water which sat at the edge of my workspace in readiness for mixing the next batch of concrete. Lowering her muzzle into the tepid water, she drank deeply. When her thirst had been satisfied, she ambled over to where I stood, her tail generously sweeping from side to side. She smiled up at me with gentle eyes, before sitting on my feet, leaning her bulk into my legs for support. I bent down and scratched her chest, as I had seen Swami Narayana (her human companion) do on many occasions, and as I did so, the residual water from her jowls trickled down my bare forearm. It was wonderfully cooling and contrasted starkly with the dense, oily heat of her fur. Her pungent body odour and the coarse, slightly matted texture of her thick coat acted as a powerful mnemonic. I recoiled as the memories of Max, my beloved German Shepherd Dog who had died the previous year, flooded my consciousness and I was overcome by the simultaneous pain of the loss and joy of being reconnected to him, albeit via an intermediary. Shakti nudged the hand I had retracted and I refocussed my attention on her, realising her head was damp with my tears. She looked up at me and held my gaze again, tail oscillating gently until I wiped my eyes and exhaled. I looked around the temple, at the murthi's (statues) of the different aspects of the Hindu pantheon, bedecked with marigold garlands and anointed with sandalwood paste and red vermilion powder after the morning's mahabishekam (ritual anointing and purification) ceremony. I felt a sense of calm serenity in their presence as well as Shakti's, and even in spite of the heat it was a pleasure to spend time in here, meditating as I engaged in the work of seva (selfless service). But how might this inherently anthropocentric space appear to a nonhuman

other? Certainly Hindu and Buddhist temples across south Asia provide sanctuary and hospitality for pilgrims regardless of species and are consequently frequented by animals including street dogs and troops of monkeys. Shakti made her way slowly back to flop down heavily in the dusty shade at the entrance to the temple. Raising her muzzle, eyes half closed, she sniffed the air before lowering her head onto the outstretched paws. I found myself remembering how Max hated being indoors during the summer, and I wondered what Shakti must be feeling in the heat of the temple where the air was also heavy with incense. Why was she drawn to stay inside rather than seeking cooler shade in the landscaped grounds beyond the walls? How did the overwhelming perfume from the perpetually smoking incense impact on her ability to read the world through smell? While she was never present during the puja or mahabishekam ceremonies, Shakti could often be found in the temple during the day. Was she here because Swami Narayana was the temple caretaker? Did she feel a connection to him here even when he was not physically present? As if in response to my thoughts, her tail began to sweep back and forth on the floor and Swami Narayana appeared. I asked him why Shakti was allowed in the temple when there were such strict purity rules. “Well, she isn’t really. But it’s alright here because the water purifies the space – that’s why you can wear shoes in here and not the other temples.” I felt disappointed by this explanation, by the possibility of Shakti being regarded as a polluting presence and was reminded of an observation a former colleague had made following her own visit to the ashram. “It was such a privilege to meet Shakti! I felt as though I was in the presence of enlightenment, like meeting the Buddha!”

I recounted this anecdote to Swami Narayana. He laughed and reached down to scratch Shakti behind her ear, looking slightly puzzled by the wet patch on her head. “Well, I’m not sure about that, but she certainly is a very gentle, sensitive dog – she lives up to her name!” (Shakti has various meanings, but in this context she represents the personification of divine feminine power, the Mother goddess). He went on to tell me about his plans to breed a litter of puppies from Shakti if a suitable mate could be found, and as he did so he wiped the moisture from his hand onto his trousers. When he had finished describing his attempts at canine match making I explained the reason for Shakti’s damp head and that she reminded me of Max in so many ways, not just the physical and olfactory resemblance but because he too had been wise beyond his species, a person in a very real sense. We talked for a few minutes about what a privilege it was to be able to share our lives with truly exceptional dogs before lapsing into silent contemplation. Swami Narayana turned and went inside to examine my handiwork and I started to try and articulate a question about where he thought Shakti might be on her path towards enlightenment. Was her canine form a limiting factor? Was being reincarnated as a human always preferable? Did it always indicate a higher state of spiritual evolution? However, I realised that the Swami, being hard of hearing, was unaware that I was trying to speak with him and as it didn’t seem right to shout across the temple my questions trailed off mid-sentence and remained unanswered. I made a mental note to ask how he and other members of the community, and especially those who were not directly involved with the care of the nonhuman residents, saw other animals vis a vis humans, given the community’s belief in reincarnation and a hierarchy of species. Unlike her human carer, Shakti had excellent hearing. In a seemingly preemptive act she got to her feet and sniffed the air again. As she did so the silence was broken by distant peals of hound music echoing through the valley. Shakti turned and moved inside the temple. I got the sense she wanted to avoid a potential encounter with the originator of such a commotion! The barks grew louder and closer. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw a large beagle come into view. He was attached to a length of rope, the end of which was held tightly by one of the novice monks, Brother Danny. The beagle, Marmaduke, was on a scent, nose to the

ground, tail aloft. The rope connecting him to Brother Danny was taut and Brother Danny appeared an unwilling participant in Marmaduke's olfactory quest. Marmaduke embodied the antithesis of Shakti's calm disposition, and I wondered if it was coincidence that he was the only animal on the ashram (as far as I could ascertain) who had an English name? He was a testosterone-charged, frantic creature, always on the move and very vocal. Their differences in personality and demeanour might easily have been dismissed on the grounds of breed, and yet during the 8 years I spent researching mounted foxhunting, I was frequently struck by the diversity which existed within the outwardly homogenous 'pack' of foxhounds [...]

Stage 3

Multi-species ethnography (selected section combining reflexive analysis of thick description with some relevant theoretical connections incorporating both human and canine perspectives):

Example: ...Shakti nudged the hand I had retracted and I refocussed my attention on her, realising her head was damp with my tears. The cynic might dismiss her actions as entirely self-interested, motivated by a hedonistic desire for the caresses to be resumed. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence that dogs, like many other human and nonhuman animals, are pleasure seekers (e.g. Balcombe 2006). However, dogs are also widely employed in a range of animal assisted interventions and professions, and one of the reasons they are used more frequently than any other species is because they are adept at reading our various forms of non-verbal communication. The mutualistic ability is arguably in part a direct result of our close co-evolution. We have selectively bred dogs who are able to interpret and attend to our needs. But dogs have also influenced the process of domestication, taking active roles in shaping their relationships with humans (e.g. Haraway 2003) and other domesticates. So, it is most likely that Shakti's nudges were a combination of care and self-interest. Indeed, as Shakti looked up at me and held my gaze again, tail oscillating gently as I wiped my eyes and exhaled, her actions made me feel as though she cared. Building on Puig's work, Van Dooren's tripartite definition of care conceives of it as a combination of affective state, ethical obligation and practical labour; "As an affective state, caring is an embodied phenomenon, the product of intellectual and emotional competencies: to care is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way. As an ethical obligation, to care is to become subject to another, to recognise an obligation to look after another. Finally, as a practical labour, caring [...] requires that we get involved in some concrete way, that we do something (wherever possible) to take care of another" (Van Dooren 2014: 291–292). On the basis of our brief exchange, it seemed to me as though Shakti fulfilled all three of these criteria. The way she interacted with me suggested she was clearly affected by my emotional outburst, she recognised an obligation to do something and consequently took steps to provide comfort and reassurance. Her gaze was particularly powerful and penetrating, but while prolonged eye contact might be thought of as a potential act of intimidation, canine communication is extremely complex and very few instances of eye contact are actually threatening. Dogs communicate a great deal through their eyes, and Shakti's eyes were kind and concerned. Indeed, dogs, like many other animals including humans, possess not only self-awareness and a theory of mind (i.e. the ability to recognise that other individuals are also thinking, feeling beings) but also the ability to empathise with the predicaments and emotional states of those with whom they are interacting. They can sense and respond appropriately to the

emotional and/or physical states of distressed human (e.g. Custance and Mayer 2012) and the cues of human handlers, as well as working autonomously in response to the specific and highly specialised situations within which they are employed (e.g. Coulter 2015). The power of canine capacities to sense and understand human internal states is exemplified by those dogs who predict and alert their chronically ill human companions to, for example, impending epileptic seizures or hypoglycemic episodes (e.g. Hardin et al. 2015). By holding my gaze, gently wagging her tail and nudging me it seemed as though Shakti was assessing my emotional state, reassuring me with her eyes and tail, and waiting until I was more emotionally stable before leaving me to go about her business. The physical contact from the nudging and caresses also had a role to play. Indeed, numerous studies have documented increases in oxytocin (commonly known as the ‘bonding hormone’) levels as a result of both tactile and eye contact between humans and dogs in certain contexts (e.g. Nagasawa et al. 2009). Not only can stroking a dog induce positive physiological and emotional responses in humans, such as lowered blood pressure and a sense of calm, but the process can go both ways. Dogs also benefit from increased levels of oxytocin during positive interactions with humans with whom they have some positive connection.

It’s a daunting task for us, as humans, to even attempt to understand what it must be like to have such powerfully sensitive senses, to be able to smell fear, sadness, or hypoglycemia. And yet maybe this is as much a problem of ontology as it is physiology, something which the recent ontological turn in the social sciences has foregrounded (e.g. Kohn 2015, 2013 cf. Descola 2014). In other cultural contexts, individuals are able to transcend the limitations of their human form, either through meditation, trance, shape shifting or the ingestion of certain psychotropic substances. In these altered states of consciousness and/or physicality, it is possible to experience and understand the nature of other life forms. And this is not just restricted to human shamans. For the Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon for example (Kohn 2007), dogs are also fed hallucinogens to enable them to engage in ontological translation between their own way of being in the world, and the lifeworlds of others with whom they interact, including jaguars and humans ...