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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I explore the differences in the ways people write and talk about their relationships with animals, focussing on those they regard as kin and with whom they live. I draw on responses to the Animals and Humans Mass-Observation directive, which was sent out in the summer of 2009, and 21 in-depth interviews with people who share their domestic space with animals. I suggest that writing about relationships with animals produces a particularly intimate representation which is almost confessional, while talking to another person about similar relationships renders the intimacy less obvious and represents human-animal relations in a different way. I argue that this is because the written accounts are composed with a particular audience in mind, the information divulged is not mediated by another human being and, as a result, normative constraints are less pervasive. Interview data, in contrast, are co-constructed in conversation with another person, there is the possibility of judgment during the course of the interview and normative expectations shape the discursive representation of human-animal intimacy. I reflect on the methodological implications of these findings for developing an understanding of intimacy across the species barrier.

**Key words:** human-animal intimacy, narrative methods, in-depth interviews, Mass Observation Project, representations of human-animal relations, counter-normativity, researching sensitive subjects

### **Written and spoken words: representations of animals<sup>i</sup> and intimacy**

In this paper I explore the differences in the ways people write and talk about their relationships with animals, focussing on those they regard as kin and with whom they live. I shall suggest that writing about relationships with animals produces a particularly intimate account which is almost confessional, while talking to another person about similar relationships renders the intimacy less obvious and represents human-animal relations in a different way. I argue that this is because the process of writing is not mediated by the presence of another human being and, as a result, counter-normative representations are more likely. Interview data, in contrast, are co-constructed while interacting with another person, there is the possibility of judgment during the course of the interview and normative expectations are more constraining.

The data I draw on to explore these differences take two forms: written responses to a Mass Observation directive<sup>ii</sup> entitled ‘Animals and Humans’ and in-depth interviews with people who share their domestic space with companion animals. In what follows I explore the benefits of different research methodologies for exploring a topic which is morally ambiguous and therefore sensitive, I investigate the representations of human-animal intimacy generated by written and spoken words and pay attention to both the form and content of the accounts.

### **Researching human-animal intimacy**

I became interested in the question of intimacy across the species barrier because, during an earlier study of families and social change, a significant number of interviewees spontaneously mentioned that animals were important family members (Charles and Davies, 2008). In Western societies, companion animals are increasingly counted as family and as friends, they share intimate spaces within homes, such as bedrooms and bathrooms, and are neither kept outside nor confined to certain spaces

within the home (Gabb, 2008; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Moreover they are often understood unproblematically as kin by children (Tipper, 2011). Using the idiom of kinship to understand companion human-animal relations has been linked to the increasing emotional significance of relationships between humans and animals characteristic of post-modern cultures (Franklin, 1999; Bulliet, 2005). But at the same time there is a moral ambivalence about close emotional connections between (adult) humans and other animals (Serpell, 1996) and a normative expectation that such connections are acceptable during childhood but should be left behind on achieving adulthood.

The moral ambivalence surrounding human-animal relations together with the largely negative associations of anthropomorphism mean that people are cautious about revealing too close a relationship with animals and, in interviews, laughter often accompanies references to animals as family members (Charles and Davies, 2008 see also Sanders, 1993). This is a way of testing the water and, depending on the response of the interviewer, the kinship status of an animal can be elaborated or its possibility can simply be dismissed as a joke. Similar observations have been made about the significance of researcher response in interviews with people experiencing chronic ill health; in this case interviewers effectively closed down any discussion of relationships with animals that was initiated by interviewees (Ryan and Ziebland, 2015). These examples suggest that people are sensitive about revealing the significance of their relationships with animals and that their propensity to do so is hugely influenced by the response of the interviewer in the interview interaction. Admitting intimacy runs the risk of attracting moral opprobrium and, like food practices, human-animal intimacy is 'steeped in normativity and accompanied by strong emotions' (Knight et al, 2015: 1.3).

Human-animal intimacy also has sensory dimensions which may not only be difficult to talk about but also require that an awareness of the sensory nature of experience be intrinsic to any method used (Mason and Other, 2009). This has a particular resonance for those researching human-animal relations because of the importance of touch and 'intercorporeal forms of intimacy' and the need to understand it in terms broader than 'the meeting or non-meeting of minds' (McLaren, 2014:96). In Kym McLaren's words: 'Here, we find an intimacy that is not simply one of knowing another and/or being known by the other, as if who we each are were already established and we needed only for our minds to comprehend each other. Here we find an intimacy that consists in becoming oneself through the other' (McLaren, 2014: 101). This echoes Donna Haraway's representation of the intimacy that she and her agility dog, Cayenne, share as a very material 'transfection' of DNA making 'each other up, in the flesh' in a process of becoming (Haraway, 2008: 16). Researching human-animal intimacy, therefore, calls for methods that are alert to its 'bodily and affective' nature, the centrality of touch and its materiality. Written accounts and in-depth interviews rely on words which inevitably involves a mental process of transformation and representation of affect and emotion. Even so, as I argue in what follows, these accounts of human-animal intimacy reveal its sensory dimensions and, in so doing, draw on different and often contradictory discourses (see Michael, 2000).

### **Written methods**

Those researching sensitive subjects often have recourse to written methods such as diary keeping, memory books, auto/biography and autoethnography (Knight et al,

2015; Wright, 2009). Such methods involve a level of reflexivity which may be difficult to achieve in an interview (Alaszewski, 2006) and can be used in combination with interviews in order to generate more intimate and embodied accounts (Thomson and Holland, 2005; Spowart and Nairn, 2014). Moreover, written methods may capture intimacy and the affect and emotions associated with it more directly than interviews precisely because of the absence of an interlocutor (Smart, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Thus Jeannie Wright, in an auto-ethnographic piece comments: 'I am not shamed by the words I write, in the way that I might be if I were to sit in a relationship with "a therapist" and speak them. Therapists hold power in a variety of ways, even feminist therapists' (Wright, 2009: 628). This could equally be said of researchers.

Narrative methods, both written and spoken, have been identified as particularly effective in engaging with emotions (Kleres, 2011) and the emotional power of narrative is widely recognised. Jonathan Friedland writing recently about climate change activism suggests that the activist 'argument, like any political argument, won't be won with data and graphs but with a narrative. It has to address our hearts, not our heads' (Friedland, 2015). Narratives are stories, they have a beginning, middle and end and vary in length (Stanley, 1993; Elliott, 2005). They reveal the details of a particular life lived in a particular time and place in the context of particular social relations, the '*objective* factors of the situation', as well as reflections on that life, '*the subjective* interpretation of that situation' (Chamberlayne et al, 2000:3).<sup>iii</sup> It is this particularity that enables narratives to engage so effectively with emotions; emotions are felt for particular people, places and things (Lupton, 1998) (and, we may add, animals) and narrative allows emotions to be spoken (written) 'from within' rather than reported from an 'emotional distance' (Wengraf, 2001:9). Importantly, written responses to MO directives take a narrative form and deal with particularity; they are akin to the life stories collected by oral historians and can be considered a 'variant of the autobiographical genre' (Sheridan, 1993:31; Sheridan, 1996).

The argument that narrative methods are essential for engaging with emotions does not distinguish between written and spoken words and I want to suggest that writing about emotions in narrative form enables intimacy and emotional connection to be communicated to the reader from within. The reader is affected by the stories they read. As others have observed, novelists generate emotional responses in their readers through their story telling (Barbalet, 2002). They also illuminate wider social processes in their focus on particular life stories thereby doing sociology better than many sociologists (Mills, 1970; Rustin, 2000). In what follows, therefore, I shall argue that there is a difference in the emotional resonance of written and spoken narratives when the topic is human-animal intimacy and that the embodied and sensory nature of intimacy emerges from both types of account but in different ways.

### **The Mass Observation directive**

The written accounts I draw on are responses to a Mass Observation directive while the spoken accounts were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These two methods were linked in so far as I used responses to the MO directive as a basis for developing the semi-structured interviews. However I was not able to talk to the writers of the MO directives about what they had written; those I interviewed were not selected from the MO correspondents (cf. Sheridan et al, 2000).

The MO directive was called *Animals and Humans* and was sent out in the summer of 2009. It began with the following paragraph where instructions were given to the correspondents about how to respond to the prompts it contained, a normal occurrence when using written methods (Alaszewski, 2006; Harvey, 2011).

This directive is about the part played by animals in your life, from your childhood until the present day. You may live and work with animals or rarely encounter them – whatever your circumstances we are interested in your experiences with animals and any stories you can tell us which throw light on the part they play in your life.

In this paragraph emphasis is placed on the way animals have featured ‘from your childhood until the present day’ thereby encouraging an autobiographical or life story approach; it also invites correspondents to tell stories. Indeed, Dorothy Sheridan, chief archivist from 1990 until 2010 encouraged a ‘more reflexive and less observational’ style and, since 1981 when the Mass Observation Project was re-launched, personal experience has been valued and responses to directives have been more ‘interpretative and subjective’ (Sheridan et al, 2000:84-5).

In addition the directive presented correspondents with a series of prompts asking them what animals mean to them, what they remember about animals from their childhood, what part animals play in their lives now; whether animals contribute to their well being; whether they eat animals; whether they’ve experienced the death of a companion animal; whether they’re concerned about animal welfare; what they think about sports involving animals; whether they watch films about animals and their relationship to wild animals. It also asked them to reflect on some general questions such as ‘What is it that distinguishes a pet from other animals?’ and ‘People sometimes say that their animals are part of their family – has this been your experience?’

These prompts are precisely that; there is no expectation that correspondents will address all of them and they are free to write as much or as little as they wish in response to the directive. There were 244 written responses to the MO directive. The ages of correspondents range from 16 to 90 with two thirds being women and one third men. This reflects the composition of the MO panel at the time (MO, 2009).

### **Interviews**

I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with 19 women and 12 men whose ages ranged from the early 20s to 80. I contacted interviewees in different ways: 5 through a veterinary practice in a very middle-class area; 5 through Guide Dogs; 5 through the Dogs’ Trust (a national UK rescue organisation for dogs); 5 through snowball sampling in a working-class area of a city and one through the university where I work. Interviews generally lasted between an hour and a half and two hours and in all but one the animals were present. In 11 of the interviews two or more people were present as well as animal/s; the presence of animals and other humans shaped the interviews as I explore below.<sup>iv</sup>

I developed the interview schedule to investigate issues that had been written about in the responses to the MO directive. I was particularly interested in pursuing how it is that animals become kin and how interviewees understood their relationships with

their animals. Interviewees spoke at length about their animals, particularly the practicalities of their relationship and their characters and personalities, but not so much about their feelings towards them. And when they did it was more in the style of reporting on them from the outside than describing them from within. This may partly have been because 11 interviews were with two people and often there was some joking when emotions emerged. In interviews with one person it was possible to get closer to emotions but they were not represented in the way they were in the written accounts.

### **Mass Observation accounts**

Responses to MO directives are very varied (Kramer, 2014; Savage, 2007; Sheridan et al, 2000) and the Animals and Humans directive is no exception. Some responses are less than a page and some are many pages long, some are handwritten and some are typed or, more often, word-processed, some contain photographs of pet animals and one includes a picture of a cat's grave. Many have the quality of diary entries and can be quite intimate and revealing (Kramer, 2014); they have an unusual 'richness and depth' (Smart, 2011a:541; Casey et al, 2014). Some correspondents reply as if they are writing a letter, revealing their emotions and adopting a confessional style, while others are more like school essays, formal and restrained (Sheridan, 1993:35). MO directives encourage a subjective mode of writing that reveals the 'feelings, opinions and activities of the writer' but correspondents also write in a more objective mode that is more formal 'social reportage' (Sheridan, 1993:32). This distinction corresponds to the difference between writing from within and reporting from an emotional distance (Sheridan, 1993:34; Sheridan et al, 2000; Wengraf, 2001) and, as I shall suggest, differentiates written from spoken accounts of human-animal relations.<sup>v</sup>

There are two things that are important about the written accounts: they are composed with a particular audience in mind and they are anonymous. Correspondents aim to provide an accurate historical record for posterity and, at least in this directive, do not shy away from recording intimate details of their relationships with animals. Indeed there is evidence that correspondents try to be 'truthful' so as to generate a 'people's history' and are able to be more honest, particularly about their feelings, when writing for MO than in conversation (Sheridan et al, 2000: 170). At a round table discussion at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary Mass Observation conference in July 2012, correspondents said that they often wrote about things that they had not spoken about to others. They also expressed concern that if their responses were digitised this might make them think twice about what they wrote because of the perceived risk to their anonymity.<sup>vi</sup> The knowledge that they will not be identified gives them a freedom to write things that they may not otherwise reveal (Sheridan et al, 2000:177, 182).

It is also significant that the information divulged is not mediated by another human being although correspondents often write as if they are addressing someone, the archivist or researcher, and may take issue with the assumptions of the directive and even what it is asking about (Sheridan, 1993; Kramer, 2014). In the Animals and Humans directive, for instance, two correspondents objected to the implied separation between animals and humans in the title of the directive.

So how is intimacy represented in the written accounts, the responses to the directive? In what follows I look at both the form and the content: the forms I explore are the life histories and fragments and the content is the emotional intensity involved in writing

about animals, the sensuality of the relationships and the moral ambivalence surrounding intimacy with other than human animals. I draw comparisons with the interview data later in the paper.

### **Life stories**

What is striking about the written accounts is the intensity of the emotions that are represented and the way that correspondents write their life stories through their accounts of the animals with whom they have been involved since childhood. This contrasts with the narrative fragments that are also present and has also been observed in responses to a directive on gardens (Bhatti, 2014). Here I look at examples of both in order to explore the intensity of emotion that is represented in the accounts and the sensory dimension of relationships with animals.

Many correspondents wrote about sharing intimate spaces with animals; the importance of physical closeness and touch are brought out in these accounts as well as the embodied nature of the relationship. Here I recount the story of a 78 year-old woman, who was widowed (B1898, F, 78). She told her life story through her cats beginning by writing that animals mean a ‘very great deal’ to her, ‘But I love cats.’

Her first cat was bought by her parents to make up for her grief at moving out of her grandparents’ house when she was 4 and a half. She writes:

I often shut myself in the cupboard under the stairs to sob into its tabby fur and it licked the tears away as they trickled down my cheeks.

When she married she and her husband got a ‘beautiful half-Persian tabby called Tiger-B’. She writes:

I was pregnant and eager for a pet as company ... we adored him. Actually he was more fun than the baby and a good deal less trouble! Also, he helped to amuse the baby who loved him too and subjected him to squeezes and far too fierce cuddles.

Then, after a succession of cats and long stories about them all she and her husband bought a Siamese cat, Max. On his death they were ‘devastated’.

Strangely, our marriage was also coming to an end and the death of our beloved cat seemed to spell out my release. At the time it seemed that little animal was all that had been keeping us together.

After her marriage broke down, with the death of a much-loved cat, and living on her own in a flat, she writes about buying another Siamese.

Zanadu was, I suppose, the cat of my life. ... we adored each other ... Disregarding, from the first, every basket, box, cushion, cardigan I offered as a possible bed, he spent the first night in a box of records at the bottom of the wardrobe. Silly boy! For every night afterwards he slept behind my knees in whatever bed I chose. It was his place. We even turned over in concert! When it was really hot he might burrow upwards and some mornings we ended up nose to nose on the pillow, but his favourite place was behind my knees.

And she ends her account with her remarrying her husband, their final Siamese, and this cat's death at far too young an age from cancer.

For my husband that was the last cat.  
Now I am alone except for my cat, Robbie, who I've rescued and of whom  
I'm fond.  
I'm just not brave enough to give my heart again.

She tells her life story through her cats; their stories are intertwined with hers and mark the significant events she experienced – as a child, as a wife and mother, as a woman living on her own, and as a widow. The confessional nature of the account is very striking: as a mother she found the cat more fun than her baby daughter and after her divorce she shared a bed with Zanadu, the cat of her life. The importance of physical closeness, embodiment and touch are evident in her description of them turning over in unison and often ending up nose to nose on the pillow as well as in her childhood experience of her kitten licking away her tears. It is also present in the concern that her baby was giving the cat cuddles that were 'too fierce'. Affect is also written about – her tears and her inability to give her heart again. Her account has a clear narrative structure which is driven by her emotional connection to her different cats. As a child her cat comforted her by licking away her tears, as a newly-married wife she found the cat easier to deal with than her baby, the death of a cat marked the end of her marriage, as a divorced woman she had what is possibly the closest of all her relationships with cats and now, after the death of her husband, her story ends with her not being able to give her heart again, though she still has a cat of whom she is 'fond'. The lived life is anchored by the cats and the story told is the meaning that these cats hold for her, the nature of her relationship to them and her feelings for them. And it is a narrative that both moves and is moving – it has a beginning, childhood, a middle, marriage and motherhood followed by divorce, and an end, the death of her husband and her inability to give her heart again, to a cat but possibly also to another human being.

### **Fragments**

Intimacy is not always about comfort – feelings can be intense and sensual and fragments of text can take the form of stories. An 80-year old man who had 'never had an interest in animals' wrote:

The only 'animal story' I can recount involved Yrs Truly sunbathing on Porthmear beach, St Ives forty-five years ago. I was clad in the tiniest strip of clothing, and a small black cat which was wandering about the sand jumped unbidden, onto my flat belly and licked all the available flesh. I have never forgotten the sexy roughness of the tongue: these days people would say it was "like, wow!" (F2218, M, 80)

What is striking about this fragment is the sensuality of the touch, something which may not have been voiced in an interview for fear of moral censure. Admitting to being affected in this way by a brief encounter such as this is not easy because it flies in the face of normative assumptions about appropriate relations between animals and humans, but this correspondent feels able to reveal this encounter in the anonymity of his writing for MO. It is also tantalising – we are given a fragment, a short story rather



than a life story, and because of the anonymity of the writing and the control over it that the writer enjoys it is not possible to ask him to say more. And in an interview situation where it might have been possible to pursue the fragment, it is unlikely that it would ever have been voiced.

The intensity of emotions also appears in these narratives with many correspondents writing about falling in love (Smart, 2011; Birke, 2007).

One of the most intense experiences in my life was with a young Pekingese whom I found one day hiding under a car in a street in West London. He had no collar and seemed lost, so I took him to the police station and they took my details, letting me bring him home until he was claimed. But no one did claim him so he became mine and we fell in love with one another: he was enchanting. (D996, F, 82)

It is significant that the writer refers to this as one of the most intense experiences of her life; she is reflecting on her experience as well as recounting it, and in its intensity it goes against normative expectations of human-animal relations. She, like the other correspondents quoted, is revealing 'counter-normative practices' without fear of moral censure (Roseneil, 2011: 28). What also emerges is the ethereal aspect of the relationship (Mason, 2008) – 'he was enchanting'. This language is reminiscent of magic and fairy tales and suggests a power emanating from this small dog, the power to enchant and to move her to love (see also Burkitt, 2002: 159).

These fragments are very different from the life stories told through relationships with animals; they are tantalising glimpses which you as a researcher are unable to pursue but which may be one of the reasons such intimate revelations are made. Even though they are fragments they reveal the sensory dimensions of human-animal relations, how affect and emotions are experienced and their intensity in ways which, I suggest, do not emerge in interviews.

In these examples emotionally intense relationships between writers and animals are written about without apology. They are written about from within as well as from without and it is a writing that moves the reader. This is made possible by both the absence of an interlocutor and by the anonymity of these accounts both of which mean that there is no possibility of moral censure. This does not mean that writers were unaware of this possibility and some narratives were marked by reflections on the morality of intense involvement with animals even while expressing it. This sort of reflexivity is made possible and encouraged by the MO project and is something that marks off these written accounts from the interviews.

### **Moral ambiguity**

Writers considered the moral ambiguity of intense involvement with animals; sometimes an event involving the animal is carrying huge emotional weight and the writer reflects on this. One woman wrote about the death of her pet sparrow, it died when her husband inadvertently knocked it with his foot, and it spelled the end of their marriage, she was inconsolable for days. Similarly another woman remarks on how painful it is to write about the death of the cat that she, her daughter and her former husband shared. She commented that she was finding it painful to recount the story, 'not because of the cat but because of the breakup of the relationship'. But she

then says that she was ‘distraught’ when the cat finally died and that ‘saying goodbye was terribly, terribly painful’ (H2418, F 57). These stories are about painful endings and loss, the loss of the animal is often entangled with another loss, the end of a relationship, the loss of childhood, the loss of a person. Others were moved to tears while writing - ‘I’m crying as I write this’ – which reveals how much they are affected by what they are recounting and also affects the reader.

As well as reflecting on their own emotional response to animals correspondents also recounted their views of others – and again their accounts are contradictory and they reflect on these contradictions. There is a mixture of approval and disapproval of others’ actions which alerts us to the moral ambiguity surrounding closeness to animals. One woman wrote about a man whose daughters had bought him a dog when his wife had died.

Then his daughters bought him a small dog. He lived for the animal, which was very agreeable. The only thing. He allowed it to sleep on his bed, and in the morning, its head was on his wife’s pillow. I would haunt my old man if I were to be replaced by a dog. [*But then later she wrote in relation to her husband:*] If he pegs it first, the second thing I would do is get a dog, which contradicts what I said about friend’s brother-in-law. (The first thing I would do is make a bonfire of his junk). (B1180, F, 70+)

The writer clearly understands the dog as replacing the wife in the bereaved husband’s affections – this is symbolised by the dog sharing his bed and having its head on the wife’s pillow. The writer is expressing a moral judgment in her phrase, ‘I would haunt my old man if I were to be replaced by a dog’. A dog cannot replace a wife, the relationship cannot and should not be the same. However, she herself recognises the difficulty of maintaining this moral position when saying that she would get a dog if her husband dies before she does. Either she has to judge herself by the same standards and therefore not get a dog (to replace her husband) or she has to recognise that the judgment she made so quickly is problematic. This reflexivity is one of the things that stands out in the MO accounts and reveals the norms governing human-animal intimacy at the same time as questioning them.

Thus far I have shown that the written accounts have a particular emotional resonance: they reveal an intensity of emotions and have the power to move the reader. They write of an intimacy for which touch and inter-corporeality are central while, at the same time, reflecting on the normative prescriptions surrounding human-animal intimacy and revealing counter-normative practices. What I want to consider now is the different feel of the interview data and the way human-animal intimacy is represented in spoken words.

### **Co-presence**

One of my contentions is that the anonymity and absence of an interlocutor enable correspondents to the MO directive to express the different dimensions of human-animal intimacy with particular clarity. In contrast, interviews are co-constructed in conversation with another person, there is the possibility of judgment during the course of the interview and, even with assurances of confidentiality, research participants are known to the researcher. Because of these differences, the discursive representations of human-animal intimacy take a different form; emotions are not

expressed so openly or with such intensity and the moral ambivalence surrounding human-animal relations and fear of being judged are much more constraining. I shall argue that this generates a different representation of human-animal intimacy.

One of the main differences between interviews and written accounts is that interviews are not only about words but also provide an opportunity for observation. Spoken words can be supplemented by observation of material, embodied relationships and, in the interviews I carried out, animals were present as well as being talked about; they touched and were touched, making their physical presence felt. This was maybe the most important element of interviews – that animals were there – on knees, on settees, walking over tables, lying next to the interviewee and being stroked, playing, doing tricks, investigating the interviewer and demanding attention. The relationship was visible and tangible. It was revealed not only through the spoken word – hearing – but also through sight and touch, and it was often instigated by the animal.

### **Emotional distancing**

In interviews it was more difficult to explore feelings about animals, people distanced themselves from emotional closeness and made excuses for any sign that it was there. A heterosexual couple said that they had made provision for their animals in their wills, thereby revealing the animals' importance to them, but at the same time they claimed to be a bit weird. In doing this they were demonstrating that they were aware of the social norms they were challenging. Others suggested that people might not approve of a dog sharing a bed and still others made jokes about emotional attachment thereby reducing its importance (see also Charles and Davies, 2008). Moral ambiguity was much more present and judgment was pre-empted by these tactics of distancing. In one interview a heterosexual couple spoke about the dog sharing their bed.

F: We've tried the, "That's your bed, you sleep there," but generally it's under the covers at the bottom of the bed.

**Oh, is he? So he keeps your feet warm.**

Yeah.

**That's nice.**

*M: Not in the summer it's not though.*

**No, I suppose not!**

*M: He's a hot water bottle, it's like, "Get away from me! You're too warm!"*

F: He's got this thing where now, where he'll go under the covers and he'll actually lie full stretch between us, and if I'm on my side, he sleeps round at the side of me, lengthways. .... Yeah. I know it's not, I know a lot of people don't like the thought of dogs being in their bed, but... we don't actually mind. (016)

In response to the comments about the will and sharing a bed I found myself reassuring interviewees that they were not unusual rather than asking them to think about their embarrassment. The dynamics of the interview situation, where there was some reluctance to reveal too much closeness with animals, resulted in my closing down avenues rather than opening them up. Or rather I closed down the avenue of exploring the embarrassment so that they would continue to describe the closeness and intimacy of their relationship with their animals. This was, however, described in physical terms, as in a dog sharing a bed, rather than in emotional terms and, in the extract above, the male partner was careful to distance himself from any positive

emotional meaning by pointing out that the dog was 'too warm' in the summer. The talk is of a literal distancing but the effect is to distance himself from the closeness being described by his partner.

Emotions were spoken about elliptically, the emotional content of the relationship being assumed rather than made explicit. A police dog handler spoke about his dogs 'getting in', i.e. his becoming attached to them. He also spoke in spiritual terms when talking about his attachment to the dog he used to work with who had since died.

... And do I talk to the ashes? Yes, I do. So, if I move him out that cupboard, I tell him I'm moving him because of things people have said to me of experiences they've had. I didn't want to risk it, you know. ... I'm always like in the back of my head, I always say it tongue-in-cheek, "Oh, Bodge, I'm just moving you now, I'll clear up, don't start causing any trouble." Deep down, I know he's still here. I've got a bit of his fur in a cup here. (017)

This was a man who began by talking at length about the dangerous work he does with his dog and how his life depends on the dog – quite macho stuff – but underneath it all there was a really deep, emotional and spiritual connection which took a long time to surface. But even when it did he distanced himself from what he was saying by remarking that he always says it 'tongue in cheek' and that he 'didn't want to risk it'. In the next breath, however, he says that he knows the dog is 'still here' and he told me that he kept the dog's collar and lead and was not able to use them for another dog. These are not feelings but indicators of feelings which clearly co-exist with a reluctance to admit to them. He reports on and alludes to feelings rather than expressing them.

In other cases the emotional aspect of the relationship was downplayed through joking. Here is another man speaking.

*M: I think if you want to know true love is it's to look into your dog's eyes to be honest, it's just...*

F: Not look into my eyes?

*(Laughter)*

*M: OK, let's switch the excavator off now, stop digging! (004)*

Although he later reported that he loved his dog.

It's actually a feeling of love for that particular thing, I mean I couldn't transfer that love onto a hamster.....a fish, a cat or anything else, it's that particular dog.....it's that particular dog, but I love all dogs but this particular dog is...I mean I've spent, well we've probably spent over three thousand pounds in vet's bills in the six months that we've had him you know, I wouldn't do that for a cat or.....or any other animal.....that I had. (004)

What comes across strongly is that the love is for a particular, individual dog rather than dogs in general or any other species of companion animal. That he loves his dog is in no doubt but what is different from the written accounts is that he is reporting the emotions rather than expressing them. And he also measures his love not in terms of intensity, tears, feelings – as in the written accounts - but in monetary terms. Money

may not buy you love but, for him, it measures the love he feels. This account reveals a strong emotional bond between him and his dog but it neither speaks of affect nor does it move the reader in the way that written narratives do.

### **Idioms of kinship**

When interviews were with more than one person it seemed to be harder to talk about emotions and intimacy. In an interview with a heterosexual couple, one of whom had a guide dog, the husband spoke about his previous relationships with guide dogs in terms of marriage, the form of the relationship rather than its emotional content. He said of getting a new guide dog:

I used to describe getting a new dog as akin to getting married, you know it was that level of uncertainty, risk if you like you know, that you had to form this relationship with this new person ... I would also liken ... a successful relationship with a guide dog as well, they're like having a child, you know it's that degree of closeness I think. And I used to say if my dog was taken away ... I felt as though my left arm had been cut off because your dog is sort of attached to you all the time and you feel it working through your left arm and so when you don't have the dog at the end of your left arm, particularly when you're outside, it seems a part of you missing, you know it's very, very close. (010)

In this he is partly repeating what Guide Dogs say to those who are about to welcome a guide dog into their lives – they liken the relationship with a guide dog to a marriage. But apart from this there are other elements of the relationship that stand out: it is like having a child, another kinship analogy, and it is a profoundly embodied relationship. If the guide dog were not there part of his body would be missing, the dog is an extension of his left arm, and the connection is 'very, very close'; together they are something more than they are apart (cf. Michael, 2000). This closeness, however, is not understood in terms of touch but as the dog being an extension of his arm without which he feels incomplete. It is a task-related closeness rather than an emotional connectedness. He saw his relationship as a 'working partnership, master and dog kind of thing' and although he felt his dog 'was integrated into the family', he

wouldn't say it was part of the family, that's a bit sentimental for me but it was certainly integrated into the household and, you know, had its place in the household and its respect in the household. (010)

Although he uses the discourse of kinship, particularly in describing his wife's relationship with her dog which he sees as maternal, he defines his own relationship with his dog as a working one, a partnership where one partner is dominant. There is reluctance to admit to an emotional attachment to his dog – counting 'it' as part of the family is 'sentimental' despite drawing an analogy between a guide dog and a child. In other words the emotional dimension of the relationship is not directly spoken about and can, if necessary, be denied – the discursive representation of the relationship takes a different form.

### **Discussion**

In this concluding section I draw out the methodological implications of my evidence and reflect on what it reveals about representations of human-animal intimacy. Both

written and spoken words describe the emotional and inter-corporeal dimensions of close relationships with animals and the ways in which animals are integrated into social relationships with humans. They also provide an insight into the moral ambivalence surrounding human-animal intimacy, the sensory and embodied nature of human-animal relations, and their affective dimensions. But the 'feel' of the data and the emotional resonance of the accounts are different and there are differences in how intimacy is represented. This, I suggest, is due to the ways in which the accounts are structured, the anonymity of the written accounts and the constraining influence of normative expectations about human-animal relations.

In the written accounts the emotional intensity and sensory dimensions of human-animal intimacy are very evident; written words in narrative form are particularly good at revealing affect and capturing emotions and, as such, have an effect on the reader. They also show how important touch and physical closeness are to human-animal intimacy and do so without apology. In a culture where close emotional connections with companion animals are regarded as morally suspect and/or sentimental and inappropriately anthropomorphic, these representations of human-animal intimacy are counter-normative. They represent intense emotional connections with companion animals which court the danger of attracting moral opprobrium. In doing so they draw on widely available narrative structures such as life stories, romances and fairy tales which reveal the material and embodied dimensions of human-animal intimacy as well as the symbolic significance of animals in human lives. These discursive representations are not internally consistent; they bring together elements from disparate discourses which leads to a high degree of reflexivity on the morality of emotional closeness between companion humans and animals. In spoken words there is less reflexivity and a distancing from emotional and physical closeness. Discourses which define animals as kin or as working partners predominate with emotions and intimacy being alluded to through talk of keeping ashes, making a will or sharing a bed with an animal. The form taken by the relationship is spoken about rather than its emotional content and, as a result, the words do not affect the reader in the same way.

These different representations of human-animal intimacy throw light on the normative constraints within which human-animal intimacy occurs. In the written accounts, correspondents demonstrate an awareness of normative expectations but also provide evidence that lives are not necessarily lived according to the rules. In interviews, however, all the normal social conventions apply; embarrassment and shame are lurking, surfacing in laughter and jokes, and there is little room for reflection. The only participants in the interviews who operate outside these constraints are the animals themselves and their presence often reveals aspects of human-animal intimacy that may not be spoken about. Furthermore the interviewees, unlike the authors of the written accounts, are known to the researcher and it is the absence of an interlocutor, together with the narrative structure of the written accounts, which, I suggest, enables intimacy to be spoken from within rather than being alluded to and explains the different emotional resonance of the two sets of data.

Finally, these findings have methodological implications in so far as they suggest that written narratives where the writer is unknown to the researcher reveal emotions and affect in rich and detailed ways and that this is particularly the case where the topic of

investigation is a sensitive subject surrounded by moral ambivalence. When used in combination with other methods, such as interviews, written accounts throw light not only on human-animal intimacy, but also on the normative expectations surrounding cross-species relationships. The power of the written accounts is that they reveal the emotional and affective dimension of human-animal intimacy which remain elusive in the interview data and show how 'ordinary people' engage in counter-normative practices in their daily lives with other animals.

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<sup>i</sup> Following Marc Bekoff and for ease of exposition I use the terms animal or companion animal when referring to non-human animals while recognising that human beings are part of the animal kingdom (Bekoff, 2007) and that drawing a distinction between human and non-human animals, while recognising the animality of humans, maintains a boundary between human and other animals.

<sup>ii</sup> The Mass Observation Project is based at Sussex University in the UK. Mass Observation originated in 1937 and, since 1987, has gathered the views and

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experiences of a panel of about 500 ‘ordinary people’ on contemporary issues and events. It issues 3 directives a year and correspondents send their responses to the archive.

<sup>iii</sup> In discussions of the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) this distinction is referred to as the lived life and the told story (Wengraf, 2000a). It appears that narratives generated through this method also speak from within emotions in ways that the interviews I carried out did not.

<sup>iv</sup> Most of the interviewees (20) had dogs – 1 had a cat only and in 5 households there was a range of other animals including fish of various sorts, lizards, a parrot and a hamster.

<sup>v</sup> Women are more inclined to the former way of writing and men, especially those over 50, to the latter (Sheridan, 1993:35).

<sup>vi</sup> Mass Observation Anniversaries Conference, 5/7/12, Panel: Why I write for MO: Round table discussion with current Mass Observers.