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COMMENTARY

Can Methods Do Good?

Ethnology and Multi-species Research as a Response to Covid-19

Linda Tallberg, Astrid Huopainen & Lindsay Hamilton

In this conversational essay, three scholars working in the field of human—animal studies discuss the multi—species work that is underway in ethnology. Examples of different methodological approaches are highlighted; multispecies ethnography, crystallization, feminist dog-writing and écriture feminine. By reflecting on the value of such techniques, the authors contend that a renewed enthusiasm for methodological innovation can pave the way for more rounded accounts of social life, bringing animals and their agencies into clearer focus as companions, workers and beings in their own right. This is regarded as both an intellectual and ethical pursuit, with methods placed at the heart of the endeavour.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has engulfed many societies across the globe and has raised urgent questions about the way that animals are viewed, treated and organised in the context of consumption and trade. Covid-19 restrictions have raised the profile of debates about the live transport of animals, the wildlife-trade as well as the risk of abandonment, domestic violence and abuse of companion animals (Fraser, Riggs & Taylor 2020). Our commentary takes this unsettling and contentious context as a starting point in a three-way conversation between Finnish and UK organisation scholars who have worked on, and with, animals in their own forms of social science. We consider that the Covid-19 epidemic provides a timely counterpoint for challenging the traditional anthropocentrism of the social sciences (Labatut, Munro & Desmond 2016, 325) and argue that the importance of animals confers a form of agential capacity that remains under-researched and therefore under-theorised. We take the opportunity afforded by renewed global focus on human-animal interaction to explore the ethical inclusion and “voice” of animals as social agents.

For us, working for a better future involves unsettling the human at the centre seat of agency in the world, and understanding the relatedness of all earthly creatures (Waddock 2011) within systems to respect and support. The exploitation of animals and natural resources, the destruction of land and the pollution of the atmosphere endangers life on our planet. And, in some regards, the “lockdown” conditions of this year’s pandemic have provided additional

time for many consumers to stop and rethink the ways in which animals are used and consumed. For us, it has provoked new thinking about the moral obligations of research — the responsibility of fields such as ethnology to voice a deeper ethical deliberation on what and how we are living. A key component of this work is methodological in nature; new techniques are much needed so that the “animal question” can be better viewed and explored.

We consider our different approaches to the politics and practises of knowledge creation in a mixed species context to provide examples of new methods that carry the potential to include and give voice to otherwise silent and marginalised *Others*. By making our methods more species-inclusive, we aim to produce high impact, interdisciplinary social research that engages a wide audience; something which is vital if our work is to effect meaningful “good” in the world and build understanding about the significance of interspecies interactions. We have approached this methodological problematic through reflective and conversational writing for, as Tienari and Taylor (2019) state “we are not trying to reconcile...positions or produce a winner and a loser” but instead hope to generate a degree of “discomfort” from a “lack of argumentative closure” (p. 949). In what follows, then, we use conversational writing to explore the potential for methods to effect “good” in social settings where current power-relations serve to disempower, disadvantage and silence the animal *vis a vis* the human (Birke 2009).

In Conversation: Can there be ethnological methods for good?

Linda: The late ecofeminist Marti Kheel stated that we need to “help each other” piece together “the fragmented worldview that we have inherited...into a multifaceted tapestry...to live in a world of peace and nonviolence for all living beings” (Adams & Gruen 2014). This is an inspirational comment that prompts the question, *can we use academic methods to help each other, and specifically to help raise the profile of animals — as actors of significance — in social science?*

Lindsay: To answer this, it is first important to acknowledge that our research methods are implicated in existing power orders and Linda is right to provoke us to re-think both our relationship with the world around us as well as new methodological ventures (Law 2004). Exciting work is underway across the globe to do precisely this; influenced by the boundary-pushing voices of ecofeminists, posthumanists, postmodernists and activists. But when it comes to animals in research, there are a particular set of issues to be considered. There are limits on our understanding of animal behaviour, thinking and agency. Some of the things that different species do can appear alien to us, are mysterious or hidden from sight. Hence, the most pressing concern for ethnological methodology, perhaps, is that language forms a core of most

of our research practices and that, perhaps for too long, we have relied upon techniques of interview, text analysis and fieldnote recording to make accounts of the social world. This has focused attention towards human concerns in the social sciences. I am curious as to how we can get beyond this.

Astrid: I agree that the preoccupation with language is at the forefront of the moral questions that surround inclusivity in social science methods. As Haraway (2016) puts it, our curiosity necessitates “staying with the trouble” to resolve or at least better understand the nature of such complex ethics and epistemologies. It is important to share thoughts and ideas for practical research.

Lindsay: I agree, Astrid, and see *multispecies ethnography* as a timely intervention. Although ethnography is, quite literally, *people writing* and ethnology is, *people knowledge*, there is a growing enthusiasm to go beyond our own species limitations. There have been some interesting attempts to conduct multispecies ethnography (although much of it does not label itself explicitly in this way) by reducing reliance upon textual accounts of the field. Instead, films, interactive gallery exhibitions, role plays and arts-based workshops (for example Giraud 2016; Saldana 2005; Tedlock 2002) have brought animals into the purview of human enquiry through immersive, participatory, emotional and sensory appeals. Other studies have made use of sight, smell and sound techniques (for example Bekoff 2001; Borthwick 2006), participant listening and autoethnography (for example Birke 2014; Forsey 2010). There have even been attempts to experience the lifeworld of animals through “extreme” forms of fieldwork (Foster 2016) – a range of techniques in which the researcher sought to live as, behave as, and cohabit with wild species.

Nik Taylor and Heather Fraser’s (2019) “Rescuing me, rescuing you” project provides a valuable case in point. The project explored human-animal companionship in the context of domestic violence using an intersectional feminist theorisation applied to a range of photographic, arts-based and more traditional linguistic data. The aim of blending visual representations of animals into the study was to better constitute animals as victims of domestic violence in their own right, to accord them status as actors in the research process. Arts-based techniques, such as online exhibitions and discussions better emphasised the loving connections that were formed across species and the more traditional forms of data gathered through interview explored the human accounts of the soothing, healing and recovery oriented aspects of human-companion animal relationships before, during and after violence. The resulting outputs reached diverse, grassroots audiences as well as an academic readership (Taylor & Fraser 2019). I know this is of interest to Linda, who has conducted her own methodological experiments too.

Linda: My experience in researching animal work has used an alternative method originally found in communication studies called *Crystallization*. This

method combines different genres (e.g. poetry, narratives, visuals) to make hybrid representations that aim to engage the audience on an emotive level in a participatory manner (Tallberg et al. 2014). Feminist animal care theory, standpoint theory and dialogical aspects (Donovan 2006; 2014) offer a theoretical base from which to create a connection between the writer (or researcher) and the audience. This can be described as an arts—based, participatory technique that works in similar ways to Donovan’s (2014) extension of sympathetic “participatory epistemologies”. Working with the emotion of sympathy and empathy, the display of writing alongside artefacts, images and sounds aims to advocate for animals, draw humans into their lifeworlds, and explore their agency through the craft and participatory experience of representation. Nonhuman animal voices are also included in Crystallization writing which extends it from narrow academic positivism into the realms of imagined and poetic ranges of literacy.

Astrid: Can you share an example of this, Linda?

Linda: In my exploration of Crystallization, Astrid, readers experience the imagined voice of Lady, a (real) dog living in an animal shelter in Australia. Her voice is transmitted through poetry along with imagined narratives between the scholar-activist (researcher) and the dog. Here, through experimental literary effect, I explore aspects related to the “hidden voices” of social science research. In this excerpt, traditional fieldnotes are juxtaposed against an imagined account from Lady, which in the Crystallization format is presented alongside photographic data, poetry and field data:

Human fieldnotes:

Lady didn’t like the friendly stranger – she is not rehomingable...we can try her dog-dog behaviour on the way back to her pen, but it doesn’t really matter anymore...Lady failed. The assessor didn’t even look up from her form as she unflinchingly delivered the outcome. I heard her saying it but didn’t comprehend what she meant. Slowly the words kept echoing in my head – failed-failed-failed. A nauseous feeling hit my stomach as the realization started to form in my mind. Death.

Lady’s version:

I had seen many strange people when living on the streets with my human, and it was my job to guard him and make them go away. This is a new place. Many different scents, so exciting! But I can feel some fear in the air. Somebody I do not know comes over to me, swinging a stick! Is he going to hit me? I stood my ground and froze, staring at the stranger approaching. The three girls watched me and shifted their attention away from me to each other. Food! They’re giving me food! I greedily bit into the rawhide and tried to eat quickly with my head down, watching them carefully in case they tried to take it away from me. I knew it! They want it! I lower my head trying to shield the treat and growl to keep them away. They gave it, it’s mine...but they take it from me and lead me back to my cell. It’s wet and cold, my body aches as I jump up on the steel-framed ledge waiting for what is next.

In bringing together multi-layered stories, I seek to suspend everyday assumptions about place and silence and imagine the ways the animal might speak to us, to form a particular message to the reader, transmitting, if you will, beyond words the emotional experience of a hidden context (Tallberg et al. 2014). Crystallization is a path-breaking method, yet to be widely tested. Experiences of Covid-19, however, and particularly the time spent alone in “lockdown” by many researchers, could prove fruitful as an avenue for reflection, experimentation and creativity when seeking to convey difficult, emotional feelings as “knowledge” in the feminist sense.

Astrid: I’ve also focused on new forms of writing as method and I think there’s scope to take better account (and create better accounts) through the techniques known as *feminist dog-writing* and *écriture féminine*. It is a foundational paradigm of these techniques that writing is always ethical and political in the way it gives voice and agency to some agents and subjects, while silencing others (Huopainen 2020). For me, communicative intercorporeality between species goes beyond spoken language and includes paying attention to sensory-based cues and the importance of non-verbal communication through gestures, facial expression and bodily comportment (Nimmo 2016 & 2017). While not a feature in much traditional social science writing, not attending to more-than-text aspects of social interaction risks deanimalising or dehumanising our subjects (Hamilton 2016) and so I am intrigued by the difficult question of how to approach, write and represent animals ethically. How can our limited human meaning-making processes do different animals and their agencies justice?

Lindsay: Is this an answerable question, though, Astrid? Can we ever do justice to non-human actors through writing?

Astrid: Exciting progress has been made in this field which is helping move us into new terrain. Schuurman and Leinonen (2012), for example, propose that all human-animal relationships include an embodied, ethical and moral dimension and, drawing on that, I use feminist dog-writing as experimental writing of affectual and relational co-being between humans and animals. For example, in the piece, “Writing with the bitches” (2020), I explored what moving away from *hu-man* centered writing towards ‘more-than-human’ or *humanimal* writing could look like in practice. Here, I seek to write common worlding and relatedness, as well as express care for animal life-worlds via affect and attunement. Here’s an example (taken from Huopainen 2020):

Approaching you (interwoven with me)

The smell of paws; buttery popcorn mixed with freshly cut grass.

Four legs provide more stability and grounding than two.

What do you (want to) smell and touch in the world – where do you want to go?

Understanding species

beyond narcissistic identification

as embedded relationships (Birke 2012).

Posthuman bodies as lived bodies.

'Completely familiar and completely other'? (Sayers 2016)

How do we express

interwoven interspecies agencies,

shared affective experiences,

humanimal continuums?

This poem emerges from a feminist theoretical position but departs from academic convention to express the ordinary sticky “in-betweenness” of affecting and being affected (Gherardi 2018; Satama & Huopainen 2019). Sayers (2016) and McHugh (2012), position feminist dog-writing as a form of *écriture féminine* that seeks to put words to the humanimal, the non-oppositional and interconnected understandings of vibrant, living matter (Braidotti 2006). I have sought to extend these concepts into practical terrain by using prose and poetic forms to express entangled co-constitutions with animals rather than exclusively human subjectivity or agency in the world, to explore difficult questions of emotion, ethics and care. This mode of work calls into question the ways humans relate to, re-present and write animal *Others* (not only dogs), and challenges us to rethink the conventional species division that is predicated on both linguistic and material violence (Huopainen 2020). Feminist “dog-writing” invites us to carefully reflect on how we, as writers, co-construct the “animal” or the “human” in humanimal relations, how humans and animals intra-act relationally, and interestingly, who humanimals become in and through these relationships. Like Linda, I seek to write “differently” to make animals more agentic through writing. I also seek to problematize questions of subjectivity (who and what is the writer?) to emphasise the intra-actions (Barad 2003; 2007) and interdependencies of different elements, affects, agencies and materialities in the moving world. I hope to rethink, and thereby re-write, simplistic oppositions including the species division, the reproduction of dominant power relations, as well as the stability and anthropomorphism of linguistic representation (Baker 2019).

Concluding thoughts

As humans, we experience, move and co-exist with the various non-humans (e.g. Latour 2005) and more-than-humans (Braidotti 2006) around us. We breathe and think in entanglements with others. We inhabit bodies multiple

(Mol 2002): ecosystems of billions of microbes, hormones, tissue, skin, bones and organs consisting of billions of other living beings. By highlighting the non-oppositional connections of different bodies and materialities in multispecies entanglements (Haraway 2008), we wish to move beyond anthropocentrism. We want to learn more about our entanglements by adapting methods to decentre human agency, by sensing and being affected by the various living beings around us. Throughout our conversation, we have sought to think this through and find common ground between our different methodological approaches to provide positive first steps and present that here, as an opening provocation for future development by ourselves and others.

We remain frustrated that human-centered norms continue to dictate our scholarly writing. Animals remain “a safe object of chitchat but not of scholarly reflection” (Kuzniar 2006, 2). Likewise, being affectionate with animals, a gendered practice, has been regarded as potentially suspect, irrational, and even perverse (McHugh 2012). Many of us struggle, fail or deliberately seek to resist writing in the disembodied manner that “counts” within the neoliberal academic sphere. The pandemic has prompted many to question the connections between humans and other species, however, and has certainly focused close attention on our consumption and organisation practises with wild and domesticated species. While this is, for many a worrying time, we could also read this as an opportunity for it prompts us to ask, “What are the epistemic limits of our humanism, our scientific heritage and our living cultural world?” (Hamilton 2019, 138)

As human writers, we are not necessarily mindful enough of the limitations of our humanism, the limitations of our field’s dominant linguacentrism as well as “the limitations of our own species knowledge” (Hamilton 2019, 138). Despite the pressures of the neoliberal university, where the pressures to do more accountable, mainstream and quantitative research have only increased lately all three of us have refocused on the politics of human-animal rights in the light of the recent pandemic, and its (reported) links to the markets of China. It is fair to say from the discussion thus far that each of us has a different interest in animal-human interaction, but what connects us across these different lines of enquiry is a shared concern that the absence of other species from social research exacerbates their lower status in society. If we are to make a greater impact upon theory-creation, methodology and popular thought, we need to find new ways of listening to (O’Doherty 2016) and representing animal voices in our research. We need to find novel ways to express and represent those who communicate without human (verbal) language.

This project is rooted in care, empathy and respect for “otherness” as much as the “naturalness” in oneself which has been (often) denied through (Western) social conditioning (Hamilton & Taylor, 2012; 2013). In an “attentive consideration” (Warkentin 2010) we can “move from care to dialogue” (Do-

novan 2006) and thus open the way to hear silenced others in a mutuality, a relationship with layered meanings and perspectives, rather than the “new speciesism” of (some) reductionist animal welfare agendas (Dunayer 2004). In this commentary, we have made connections between how we theorize and write animals and how we think of their “place” in our organized world, more broadly. Through our different lenses on this matter, we have called into question our different ontological positioning for doing practical research. We have discussed the ways in which we might seek more inclusive ways of being and acting for others in the world, and how we could go about shifting the perspective towards the animal without sentimentalizing, romanticizing or constructing and upholding binaries.

The Covid-19 pandemic, while unsettling and emotionally taxing, offers us all a valuable and timely research focus to consider how we practise our social science. This crisis forces us to learn from the past, imagine and rebuild our world anew according to Arundhati Roy who challenges us to see the current pandemic as a portal. What kind of future world do we envisage? If we need to find new ways of working, writing, researching, what do they look like? It is time to undertake radical reflection on these difficult and complex questions – perhaps doing so would better support a new generation of inclusive scholarship that does not take language to be the only constituent of voice.

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