

Researching everyday human-animal encounters

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Researching Nature, 10th March 2010

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Humans and animals (1)

Growth of interest in contemporary human-animal relationships in sociology (and geography and anthropology)

Qualitative/ ethnographic analyses, exploring situations when the human-animal interface is fore-grounded:

- Farming and slaughtering animals (e.g. Wilkie, 2010)
- Animals in experimental laboratories (e.g. Arluke and Sanders, 1996)
- Vets and shelter workers/ euthanising unwanted pet animals (e.g. Swabe, 2005; Taylor, 2010)
- Humans and assistance animals, such as guide dogs (e.g. Sanders, 1999)

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Humans and animals (2)

- Animals in urban spaces (e.g. Wolch and Emel, 1998; Philo and Wilbert, 2000)
- Pets (especially dogs) (e.g. Arluke, 1996; Fox, 2006; Haraway, 2003; Sanders, 1999)
- Pets and everyday negotiation of the human-animal boundary: 'what is perhaps for most people in western society, their closest form of contact with the animal world: the domestic pet' (Fox, 2006: 3)

Themes:

- Unpicking categories of 'animal'/'human'/'natural'
- Animals and humans in 'co-constitutive' relationships (esp. Haraway, 2003)
- Animals as individuals, active, agents
- Intersubjectivity, animal minds

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Everyday encounters with animals

- Everyday human-animal encounters
- Beyond pet 'ownership'
- Not all human-animal relationships are sustained or invested
- Sustained relationships with other people's pets or wildlife
- Fleeting and casual encounters
- Negative or conflicted
- Wider context of human-animal relating
- Finding the everyday sites of human-animal encounters

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The everyday

'The everyday':

- Space (home and neighbourhood)
- Time (repetition and routine)
- Habit (the mundane, almost unnoticed)

(following Felski, 1999)

Interactions grounded in everyday space, time and habit

Including animals in accounts of the everyday

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Ethnographic approach

- Meanings, practices, participating and observing, small scale, long-term, 'gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3)
- Ethnography as 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973)
- On ethnography:
'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of *meaning*' (Geertz, 1973: 5. Emphasis mine)
- Human meanings, articulations, reflections, practices
- Making space for animals as agents/actors/individuals
- Capturing the human-animal interface -
'the 'relationship' is the smallest possible unit of analysis' (Haraway, 2003: 20)

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A neighbourhood ethnography

- Case study of a suburban neighbourhood in northern England (residential, bordering a park and riverside walkway)
- My own paths, social networks, encounters
- Participant observation in neighbourhood spaces where humans and animals interact (e.g. feeding ducks, walking dogs)
- Door knocking to recruit local households for interviews
- Documents and photos
- City council officials
- Voluntary organisations
- Local newspaper
- Online newspaper comments pages

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The life and death of Vincent the cat



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Talking about Vince

Cynthia, mentioning Vince's passing (in passing):

But, I was quite sad about it, Brian [her husband] only told me yesterday, but there was a cat - called Vincent! (laughter) But he was the most *friendly* cat. Over where the road is over there, there's a seat and sometimes I catch the bus there, and just as you walk past, he'd come up and then he'd set you to the stop! (more laughter, Becky says 'aw!') And the postman, he used to follow him up the street to deliver the letters! You know, *that's* a cat you couldn't help but like! (laughs)

(In a story-telling tone) Well, un-*fortunately*, he got knocked down. I don't know whether it was Sunday... or Monday morning... but I know a lady down the road will be *really* upset, because she was always dashing out of her house and taking him back across the road because she was so frightened he'd get run over! And now it has done (...)

Well it was Frank who told Brian that it'd been killed (...) and this lady called Olive, she'll be *devastated* (...) I'm sure she fed him and everything. So it's a shame.

Becky: Was he called Vincent, or was that what he got named?

Cynthia: No, that was his name, so Olive said. So I always called him Vincent! I'd say good morning Vincent! (laughter) He *always* came to greet you. *Everybody* who came, he always came up and said hello!

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Vincent's bench with floral tributes



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'Vince, friend to many'



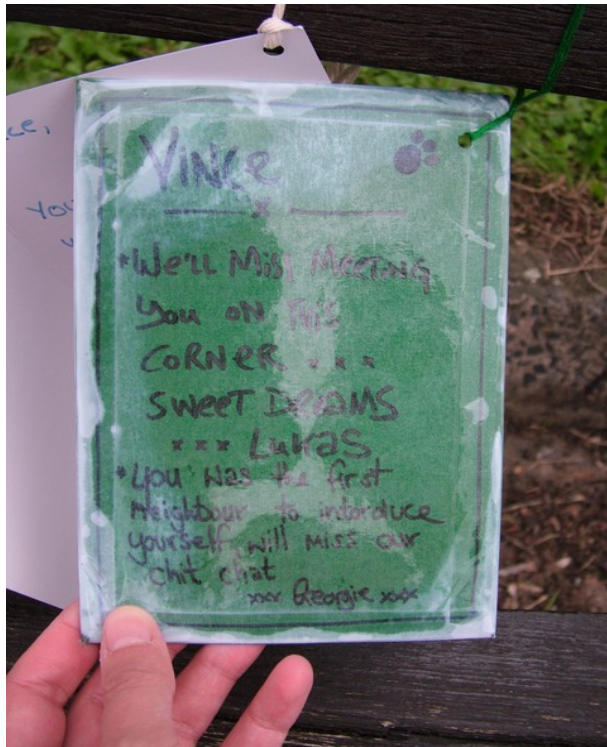
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'A dear little friend'



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'The first neighbour to introduce yourself'



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Vince,

*We'll miss meeting you on this corner, sweet
dreams. xxx*

*You were the first neighbour to introduce
yourself,*

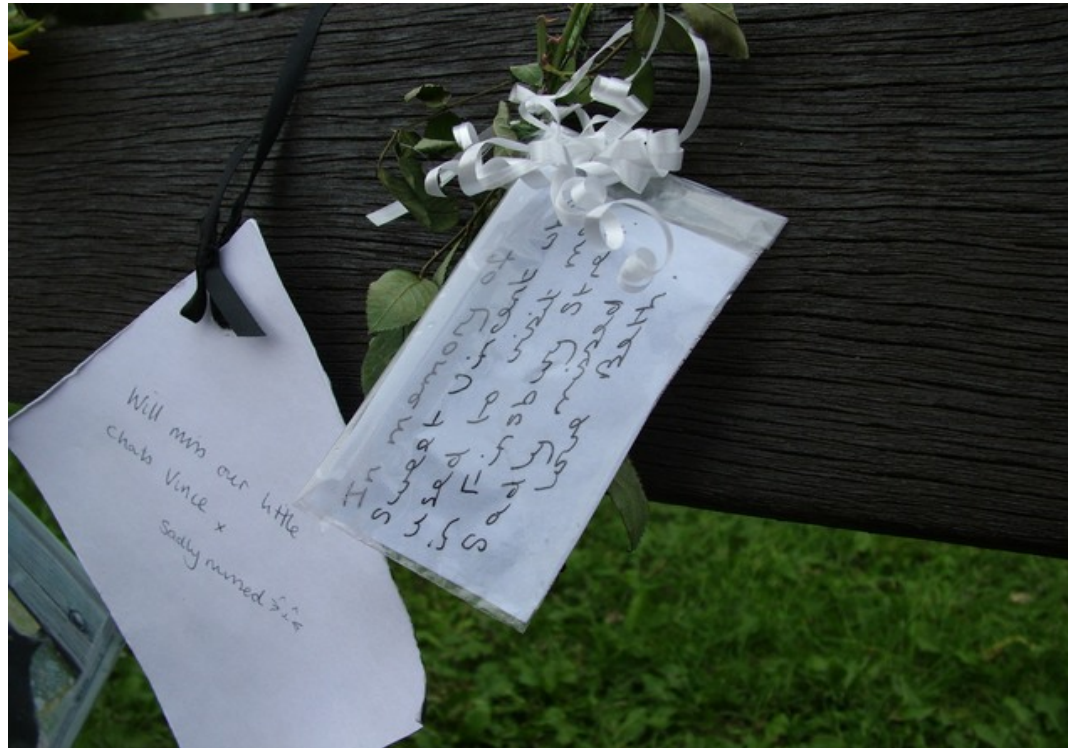
will miss our chit chat.

'In memory of my mate Vince'



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'Will miss our little chats...'



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Vincent on his bench



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Talking to Vince's 'owners'

And there's a guy on the corner and (...) he basically goes to the corner most mornings unless it's pouring with rain and - a lovely man - and he, when Vince died, he basically referred to Vince as his guardian angel! Yeah he did, he put a card, (chuckles) and Vince would just appear and be there and I think that's what Vince did.

That was his corner on the road. You know, that was his spot and he would just keep people company, and come and go, and go to the bus stop and wait for people getting off the bus or he'd walk them *to* the bus stop and wait till they got on the bus... but I mean, just quite remarkable (...)

If someone moved into the area, he was always the first person... well you know, not the first *person*, but the first *one* to go over and introduce himself!

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'Rest in puss'

Community lays floral tributes to beloved moggy

Fur-well Vince



REST IN PUSS: Floral tributes to Vince the cat (inset) on a bench in Balmoral Terrace, South Bank, York. Below, some of the messages

by JENNIFER BELL
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TRIBUTES have been paid to a popular puss that used up all of his nine lives. Vince the cat lived with his owners Naomi and Phil Darlick, in Balmoral Terrace, South Bank, for ten years and rapidly became something of a "celebrity" in the area.

"Lots of people enjoyed his company," Naomi said. "Vince was loved by adults and children alike and he brought pleasure to a lot of people's lives."

Sadly the striking 11-year-old black cat with time for everyone died on July 19, and flowers and tributes have been placed on a bench that was Vince's favourite hangout.

Naomi said: "He was found by some neighbours by the side of the road and had clearly been knocked over. "But he really had lived his nine lives. He was one of the cats who hated being stuck indoors and would go explore everywhere he could."

"He was prone to wandering, one time he went missing for a whole week. He had managed to cross Millennium Bridge by himself and was found at a nearby hairdressers."

"He loved his little adventures."

"Vince had lived in Balmoral Terrace for ten years so he knew the area like the back of his hand and in that time he had become very well known and was loved by everyone."

"With his name on his tag people got to know him by name over the years and he was befriended by all."

"He was a very friendly and outgoing cat; he was quite an incredible character really."

"He just knew everyone and their routines. He would often meet people off the bus coming home from work and walk them home."

"Vince's favourite hangout was a bench at the end of Balmoral Terrace. You would often see him sprawled out there waiting for a stroke or a titbit and watching the world go by."

"That is where people have put flowers and tributes - there are some from people we don't even know. It is amazing really, you can tell how well loved he was."

*In memory of my mate Vince.
A legend in these parts who loved this bench xxx
With sadness, love and sweet memories from Hayley xxx
(11 Balmoral Terrace) who always enjoyed sitting beside him.*

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Pictures: Frank Dwyer

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Vincent's online life

- Very sad to hear Vincent has gone - he has walked me home many a night.
- He was a lovely puss, so sad.
- Yes, remember him well. A real street cat...
- The death of a pet is always very sad - I speak from experience. However, a World War 1 veteran was buried today, yet the cat receives column inches instead? Hang your heads in shame *The Press*, this is just stupid.
- Why on earth has a cat's death got space in a paper?
- Get a life you saddos all moggys should be shot or run over!!!!!!! P.S. what a stupid story. Anymore halfwits care to comment?
- It's a cat for f*** sake (...) Get a grip!!! (...) People are killed every day on the roads and don't get this much exposure. In next week's edition no doubt we will have the full press coverage of the burial.
- I agree. I live up the road and saw the flowers last night, thought somebody had been killed at the junction.

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'Being there' - meeting Vince

- Participant observation?
- My own fleeting meeting with him
- 'How strange...' my experience resonating with occasional accounts of everyday encounters with animals as quasi-mystical



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Looking ethnographically

- Material culture, tributes, flowers, written notes
- Newspaper, and online discussions (both personal and categorical, positive and negative, tender and derisory)
- Interview talk (focussed and tangential)
- Meeting, experiencing, feeling
- Unfolding human-animal relationships

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Conclusions

- A *non*-everyday event, perhaps, but also an insight into the everyday
- How the everyday human-animal interface is played out
- Love, connections, tenderness, derision, humour, contradiction, uncertainty, flows of information, the politics of loving animals, direct and indirect engagements with animals, practices, experiences, discourses
- Polyvocality: a chatter of voices
- Animal agency: tracing Vince's tale, his connections and his paths
- Locating animal-human relationships in the everyday, simultaneously saying something about the everyday itself

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The End



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