



# ETHNOGRAPHY AFTER HUMANISM

*Power, Politics and Method in Multi-Species Research*

Lindsay Hamilton • Nik-Taylor



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Power, Politics and Method in Multi-Species  
Research



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# Ethnography after Humanism

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# 1

## Introduction: An Ecology of Ethnographic Methods

The idea for this book arose some years ago after we had completed our first joint monograph together, *Animals at Work* (Hamilton & Taylor, 2013). In it, we presented a series of ethnographic vignettes of people working with animals in some capacity or other, from those in caring occupations, such as sanctuary volunteers, to those at the opposite end of the spectrum working in abattoirs. We spent many hours, days and, in fact, years interviewing people and observing places where animals and humans laboured together in some fashion. This took us to some interesting and unusual settings: veterinary surgeries, animal shelters, meatpacking plants and farms. We noticed that work with animals took very different forms, from the close-up intimacy of the rescue shelter to the distant, strictly zoned and highly mechanised factory floor of the abattoir. While doing this fieldwork that interrogated meanings of humanity *and* animality, we analysed modes of identity construction for both human and animal groups, and assessed attitudes towards other species. In doing so, we realised that this kind of ethnographic work necessarily required us to acknowledge that we, as humans, were the ones doing the research and the writing and that the animals, while present



in our day-to-day activities as ethnographers, were often absent from our final—written—books and articles.

Ultimately, for us, this begged the obvious question, *where are the animals themselves in this research?* As we began to think about this together, and developed our thinking on methods in other projects, we became convinced that the reality is that the animals themselves tend to be written out of the story by humans, particularly if one uses traditional, human-centred methods to try and understand human–animal relations. We found this problematic on many levels. So problematic, in fact, that we decided to think it through in our next book, the results of which you are currently reading.

## Species Difference as a “Research Problem”

Ethnographers have a tendency to consider what other species mean to humans rather than considering or seeking to understand how humans and animals *co-constitute* the world. The human point of view is privileged, which means we see other animals as adjuncts to us and our lives instead of either living symbiotically with us or as having lives in their own right. Indeed, many would argue that research into such co-constituted worlds is outside the scope of the qualitative family of methods usually characteristic of ethnography and that we should, therefore, resist the temptation to speculate over that which we have no way of learning.

It is true that animal lives are dominated by a range of distinctive concerns, which are generally assumed to be existential rather than reflective. Animals also behave in ways that are sometimes counter-intuitive to us, concealing, at least to human eyes, that which we—as humans—are often able to partially or wholly reveal to each other (and to certain animals such as companion species) through a range of verbal and behavioural cues. This is tricky to incorporate in our research projects and methods because animals cannot participate through traditional methods. They do not speak or write, at least not in ways we can easily decode and interpret, meaning they cannot be interviewed, join focus groups or fill in questionnaires and surveys.

It is understandable, then, that most social science focuses on the human world, while other disciplines such as ethology and veterinary science, for example, excavate the meanings of animal behaviours differently. Although it is worth noting that even here, in purportedly animal-focused disciplines, animal *subjectivity* is often marginal or absent altogether. Working below the surface of this act of partitioning is a powerful focus on “the human”; a dominant and hegemonic belief that animals do not have *selves* or identities and, by extension, that they do not matter or at least do not matter as much as humans. This has rendered them all but invisible particularly to the social sciences. And this ensures nonhuman animals are left firmly at the margins of qualitative research practices, which at best reduces their status to objects or at worst ignores them completely within a *silent but salient* hierarchy. In choosing *not* to consider this problem, ethnographers inevitably become complicit in this silencing process. The process of *people writing* (ethnography’s etymological root) is humanistic by its very nature. In fact, like subjectivity and identity, concepts of people and personhood are intrinsically linked to the idea of the social and are, thus, taken to refer to humans rather than animals.

Even among researchers who *do* acknowledge the presence of other animals, and purport to study them in the burgeoning field of human–animal studies, most do not interrogate what it means that it is *us* who are watching *them* and that it is *us* who assert the power to speak for *them*. This is unpalatable to us for several reasons which we explore throughout the course of this book. Suffice to say here that the main reasons are linked to the problematic of power which is a central interest to us both and relevant to persistent patterns of thought which continue to dominate the social sciences. The idea that *social means human* and that the social sciences means the study of humans excludes animals from the idea of communities and, therefore, from social science. This problem sits at the heart of this book.

We engage with a serious research question leading from this acknowledgement: Why is it that many researchers dismiss the presence of other species at their fieldsites with a footnote or a throwaway comment (if acknowledged at all), rendering them invisible or ignored? And is there anything we can do, methodologically speaking, to better include animals

in our ethnographic endeavours? To be clear, we are not dismissive of ethnography as a method. In fact, we find it a vital tool in the discovery of new ideas and knowledges about human–animal relationships. But at the present time, it does not offer an easy way to include animals. It does not do what human–animal scholars need it to do. We want to expand the field of what (and who) is researchable and design or adapt ethnographies that question the primacy of the human in social spaces and our research of those spaces. This, for us, means a greater acknowledgement of the workings of power within ethnographic knowledge and meaning-making.

## Including Animals in Our Research

We have approached our separate social science research agendas differently to date. One of us (LH) is a scholar of organisations. Motivated by a desire to understand how individuals interact with animals in organisational settings, her research has focused upon the utility of qualitative, and particularly ethnographic, techniques for understanding multi-species cultures. She believes that analysing most forms of organisation in terms of our relationship with the nonhuman world opens up opportunities to address important questions of accountability, ideology and ethics and is what lies behind many contemporary discourses such as “corporate social responsibility”, sustainability and environmental stewardship. The second author (NT) is an advocate for animal liberation and her activist-scholarship plays an important part in her professional life. Motivating her research is the desire to understand the continuing uses and abuses of animals in contemporary society with a view to being able to challenge, resist and change them. Given that, statistically at least, most animals live out their lives in some form of institutionalised manner (e.g. intensive farms, zoos and animal shelters), this has taken her to the study of organisations and workplaces as well. This, then, is where our work overlaps: in the study of human–animal interaction in institutions and organisations.

While we have not always agreed on the interpretations of our field data, particularly with regard to farming and slaughtering animals, what perplexed and challenged us equally at the time of putting our first book

together (Hamilton & Taylor, 2013) was the almost complete lack of methods tailored to understanding human–animal interactions and relations. Our use of ethnography accomplished a detailed portrait of the entanglements of human and animal lives in the places we studied them, but we felt a persistent niggle that despite our shared emancipatory agenda, we were privileging the perspective of the human workers in these organisations and were far less able to speculate about alternative, animal subjectivities that co-existed in them. In doing our fieldwork, we openly encouraged humans to tell us what they thought or suspected about other beings and their perspectives; we asked for opinions and ideas about the animals they worked with and we took their responses seriously as internally logical and rational beliefs. We were not, however, equipped to find a more direct route to be able to listen for and to the voices of animals (so to speak). They remained largely silent, and therefore absent, throughout our tales from the field.

Robinson (2011, p. 6) argues that we humans are entangled by various identities, and representing these within the research endeavour is “confusing, amazing, and sometimes downright messy”. In short, our characters and identities—be they human or otherwise—compose what Eduardo Kohn (2007, p. 4) calls an ecology of selves in social life, an ecology formed organically, naturalistically and independently by living beings existing and working together, interacting and conversing. And it is this confusing, amazing and messy ecology of selves which we are seeking, as ethnographers, to account for in some way. It is not dissimilar to the “anthropology of life” that Kohn has advocated as necessary (2007, p. 6) to demonstrate that humans are only one part of a larger interconnected web of agencies and that “all-too-human worlds” exist “within a larger series of processes and relationships that exceed the human”. It is a form of social life which is inadequately mapped, frequently misunderstood or just ignored. The question we have both deliberated over for some years now is how we can begin to document this—to develop methods that allow us to see and understand the *beyond-the-human* world.

Ethnographic work is evolving towards a variety of different specialisms, for sure, but are we ever really going to be able to tell a mixed species story well enough, especially using a method predicated on writing by and for humans? Our frustrations with the limits of existing fieldwork

have been echoed by other scholars recently and a new buzzword, that of *multi-species ethnography* has emerged. But what is multi-species ethnography if, indeed, it is a method at all? Where has this development come from? And what are its possibilities and limitations? These are the secondary set of questions that this book addresses. Our hope is that in writing it, we will help to support and legitimise the rigorous endeavours of the many hundreds of ethnographers who are now seeking to take a closer look at human–animal relationships. It is worth noting, however, that we have serious concerns with narrow labels like “multi-species ethnography” and are reluctant to badge ourselves as multi-species ethnographers.

Given our concern about narrow labels as constraints, we use more generic terms “multi-species methods”, “human–animal ethnography” or “posthuman methods” consciously and interchangeably throughout the book. When we do refer to multi-species ethnography, we do so to signal narrow conceptions as used by those undertaking the work themselves. Furthermore, while we call on a number of theoretical and philosophical concepts, for reasons of coherence, we locate our own enquiry within the field of human–animal studies, an area of study which—over the last decade or so—has coalesced into a more recognisable field, variously termed anthrozoology, human–animal studies, animal studies or critical animal studies. Like any academic field, it is not without its internal cleavages or disputes, but it is a cohesive enough group to be considered a field (which we choose to refer to generically as human–animal studies throughout).

Our terminology reflects a practical choice on our behalf as we do not wish to catalogue the differences of a field to those who have little interest in internal politics, nor do we wish to have to write out the different names every time we make mention of the field. The divisions, which are often heartfelt and entirely real, can be difficult to identify and are always contested so we could not pinpoint them to everyone’s approval even if we decided to try (readers interested in the emergence of the field and its differences are referred to Taylor & Twine, 2014). Where we believe they matter most, we mention them in the text. What unites this disciplinarily and ideologically disparate field, however, is an interest in human relations with other animals, which may include individual relations between different species or

may focus upon societal and cultural relations with, and attitudes towards, animals.

It is important to acknowledge, then, that all the terms used in the field, including our own choice of human–animal studies here, are problematic. In large part, this is because they reinstate the binary of *human vs animal* that our scholarship in this area is trying to problematise. They are also problematic because they assume *animal* as a generic category, one which includes a vast array of different beings whose (often glorious) differences should not be overwritten by simply labelling them *animal*. By extension, “animal” then comes to stand for “not human”, which underlines that our terminology can shore up our pretensions to human superiority. This, too, is problematic.

Our reservations about labelling human–animal research as multi-species ethnography (even though it is an emergent paradigm) are that it may become yet another novel way to understand *the human*, and so, perhaps, inadvertently, reinscribe the very human–animal binaries it purports to deconstruct. For example, Kirksey, Hannah, Lotterman, and Moore (2016), in an attempt to “render visible the ongoing violence taking place in laboratories behind closed doors”, subjected Loretta, an African clawed frog, to an “outmoded pregnancy test” (p. 37). According to the authors of the paper written about this public experiment, they started “from a position of non-innocence, confronting the routine violence of experimental practices face-to-face with a captive frog” to consider “how humans have become dependent on complex entanglements with animals, ecosystems and emergent biotechnologies” (p. 38). While the apparently unethical nature of this project is given a token mention, much more is made of how it enabled those conducting it to blur “the boundaries between performance art, science, and ethnography” (p. 37). This is a clear example of how narrowly conceived multi-species ethnographies can fall into the trap of prioritising human knowledge over the material and lived realities of what we feel amounted to animal abuse with limited interest or application to questions beyond the extremely narrow agenda of this particular project. As Dinker and Pedersen (2016) note, it is worrying that we can “gloss over asymmetric human–animal power relations” in pursuit of new methods, methods that may even constitute “new euphemistic instantiations of human narcissism and desire

for knowledge and meaning-making, rather than formations of genuinely ethical relations" (p. 417).

In contrast, we are interested in the varied and creative—but gentle and respectful—methodological possibilities open to us once we question human superiority and anthropocentrism in our research endeavours. Hence, this book is about how we can push existing ethnographic methods forward to include other beings, genuinely and with a view to acknowledging and reducing power asymmetries between us and them. This is an ethical, philosophical and practical undertaking. We do not claim to present a straightforward "how to do multi-species research" here, because we do not yet think this is available, if it ever will be. In fact, we do not think a one-size-fits-all "how to" model is desirable and we have no wish to limit the manifold possibilities that are currently open by defining an ideal type of research model. Our main aim is to trouble easy claims of human superiority through our methods.

## Challenging Human Superiority in Research Design and Approach

Removing assumptions of human superiority from our work is no easy task for us as authors. It requires us to *un*-learn much that we take for granted and to ask questions that often seem ludicrous to others (how do we include a dog's perspective when thinking about appropriate housing for animal and human victims of domestic violence? How do we consider what wild kangaroos might "think" about our colonising of their space? How might we understand the resistance offered by certain cetaceans to our idealised images of them? Can we characterise the actions of farmed animals leaping from slaughterhouse trucks as resistance and a dash for freedom?). Such questions do not fall within the usual terrain of ethnographers. Key to our, and others', endeavours in this area is the freedom to experiment—with ways of thinking, knowing and representing. And this is why we do not offer here, nor think it appropriate to work towards, a narrow definition of multi-species ethnography. Instead, we conceive of our method simply as *ethnography done differently* and we weave together a philosophical discussion with practical suggestions. The results might



frustrate those who want a straightforward answer to the question: *How do I do multi-species/posthuman research?* We firmly believe, however, that if you want these kinds of straightforward answers, then fieldwork that tries to cross species boundaries and explore the mess and the grey areas of interspecies social life is not for you.

Thinking about species boundaries is challenging. It is extremely difficult to avoid falling back into established tropes—ways of knowing, writing, *re-presenting*—and we do not claim we have managed that throughout this book. We have, however, asked questions with a view to opening up a discussion regarding why we might want to do a form of posthuman research that focuses on multi-species relations, and considered what it might look like. Numerous mainstream textbooks exist to give researchers precise guidelines on a range of skills pertaining to the research process, and this book does not aim to replicate that well-trodden territory. However, we can say that planning a research project of any nature demands an array of sophisticated techniques and competencies, some of which take the researcher well outside their comfort zone and often into the theories and literatures of other disciplines. This is especially the case when considering multi-species relations.

Important literatures are to be found in diverse areas such as anthropology and ethnography, philosophy, sociology, geography, science studies and veterinary medicine. Navigating and making sense of such diversity adds extra complexity to posthuman research into multi-species relations, for it demands close attention be paid to the power involved: the power of authors, whatever their training, to make claims and to create worlds for, and about, their research participants (at least on paper). We aim to provide the reader with a selection of tools to navigate this political terrain philosophically and pragmatically and in so doing hope that we bring new perspectives to bear on existing research of mixed species settings: an area where there are currently very few methods books (see Birke & Hockenhull, 2012, for a rare exception).

While we tackle the study of multi-species worlds in a broadly qualitative fashion, we focus mainly (but not exclusively) on ethnography and its potential future as a more inclusive approach. This is because, with its ability to pay close attention to the symbolic forms, practices, objects and discourses of everyday life, it is a technique that creates a multi-



dimensional picture of interactions in their subtle, nuanced and often contradictory cultural context. It does this by encouraging the researcher to engage physically, discursively and emotionally with those under investigation. In other words, it moves us from seeing research “objects” to seeing—and often working alongside—research “subjects”, and places these roles as complementary rather than separate or oppositional. This lends itself to regarding humans and other animals in relations and entanglements not as so very different that they cannot be researched together.

New developments in ethnography have explored the *co-production* of research across disciplinary borderlines and between scholars and practitioners. This too strengthens ethnography’s position as a subtle and nuanced means of accessing complex worlds of meaning. At the same time, technologies such as social networking and electronic survey methods have opened up a range of novel possibilities for generating access, improving communications and triangulating (testing out) data gathered in more traditional, manual ways. Yet there is still a need to be *inside* a community of practice—there, in situ, hanging around, watching, laughing and joining in to present and witness the daily, ad hoc impulses and practices of meaning-making in a fresh light. And to that end, there have been yet further advances in method: some ethnographers turning to the principles of arts, drama and community engagement work to devise ways to break down divisions between academics and practitioners and consider knowledge as something which is produced democratically and in collaboration. This changing research environment, and in some quarters at least, the deconstruction of the subject-object-researcher divisions through participant observation, better respects and allows for the autonomous and self-propelling aspects of cultural production.

It is important, however, to mention the role of theory at this point. It is only through the subsequent application of theory that cultural experiences and first-hand ethnographic observations become more obviously located in relation to broader social forces, trends and patterns. Theory is, after all, how we make sense of our data. And we may take a range of theoretical perspectives: feminism, American pragmatism, Marxism and so on to generate a better understanding of a particular milieu. Each provides a means to anchor subjective observation to more objective philo-