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'Never an It': Intersubjectivity and the creation of animal personhood in animal shelters

Abstract

This paper argues that sociology should begin to turn its attention to human-animal interaction and that one particularly effective way to do so is to adopt a phenomenological approach. This approach sees the personality, and thus the personhood of animals, as intersubjectively and reflexively created. Based on ethnographic data collected over three years in animal sanctuaries this paper assesses how animal sanctuary workers labour collectively to establish the identity of the animals under their care and how this, in turn, justifies their attitudes towards, and treatment of, them.

Keywords

Animals; Human-animal interaction; Intersubjectivity; Personhood; Personality

Sociology has, until recently, denied any possibility that human interaction with non-human animals could ever be considered *social* which has led to a "sociology as if nature did not matter" (Murphy 1995). This is based in part on the dualist post-Cartesian legacy which denies corporeality and posits a distinction between objective and subjective worlds. This has ultimately led to a post-Enlightenment sociology which sees "itself in terms of man's ascent from animality" (Murphy ibidem: 689). Not only has this created and maintained an anthropocentric view of the world but has also resulted in the social-natural relationship being characterized "in terms of unidirectional causality from the social to the natural" (Murphy ibidem: 690).

This (sociological) lack of interest in human-animal relationships is also based on Mead's assertion that symbolic interaction can only take place when the interactants possess a sense of self and moreover that only (adult) humans can possess this necessary sense of self. Whilst Mead "extend[ed] the frontiers of sociology into an explanation of the interior and the subjective" (Collins 1989: 1) he refused to acknowledge that this could apply to human-animal interactions because of his adamance that language was central to the full realization of an individual's selfhood. For Mead, only humans, because of their ability to use language and interpret the gestures of others, could be considered capable of *social* interaction. Hence he drew a sharp, and thus far enduring, distinction between humans and other animals.

The last decade or so has seen significant intellectual challenge to this 'limiting anthropocentric orthodoxy" (Sanders 2003: 406) with a number of authors arguing that human experiences of, and interactions with, animals should be considered a legitimate area of study for sociology (e.g. Arluke 2003; Alger and Alger 1997, 2003; Myers 2003; Sanders 1993). For the most part these arguments draw on the rich traditions of phenomenological and ethnomethodological sociology which see the mind as a social construction rather than a biological given. These sentiments sustain the perception of the social world as intersubjectively experienced (e.g. Coulter 1989; Schutz 1967). The relevance of this line of thought to the study of animals within human culture is that seeing the world as intersubjectively constituted allows us to include animals. That is, if we act towards animals at any given time as though they are minded interactants then, for the purposes of that interaction, they are indeed minded interactants. The proposition here, then, is that we can empirically investigate the role of animals in society by addressing human-animal interaction.

Goffman pointed out that "the social situation [is] the basic working unit in the study of the interaction order" (Drew and Wootton 1988: 4) and that to bring an occasion to life required the presentation of ourselves in ways which "render our behavior understandably relevant to what the other can come to perceive is going on" (Drew and Wootton ibidem: 5). However, Goffman was also at pains to assert that this exercise is not achieved alone and that "while it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of that possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labour"(Goffman 1967: 84-85 cited in Cahill 1998: 137). For Goffman the part of the person "expressed through the individual's demeanour" was no more "significant than the part conveyed by others" through their treatment of them (Goffman 1967: 85 cited in Cahill ibidem: 137). Moreover Goffman also recognized that not all interchanges between individuals need to be verbal and, further, that non-verbal interchanges could have the system requirements which are necessary to interaction; that interaction "can be *anything that the participants agree to treat as explicit*" (Drew and Wootton ibidem: 35-36. Author emphasis added).

Goffman (1963) specified that interaction takes place when two individuals are co-present with one another:

> Persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sense of being perceived. (p. 17)

Many interactions between humans and animals meet this criterion. For example, Weider (1980) explains how the human-animal interaction in a primate laboratory depends upon a *mutually* perceived otherness wherein chimpers (the technicians who work with the animals) are acutely aware of the chimps, and vice versa. It is precisely this mutual awareness which Weider argues mediates their interactions. He is arguing that the chimpers see chimp behavior during chimp-chimper interactions as *motivationally manifest* and not as the result of instinct. Weider (1980) points out that both the chimper and the chimp interact with each other with a view of themselves which is gained from the others' perception of them:

> Through the intermediary of events in the outer world, occurring on or brought about by the chimpanzee's body, the chimper comprehends the chimpanzee's cogitations and, most particularly, the chimpanzee's perception of the surrounding world, including the chimper. The chimper takes himself as similarly appresented to the chimpanzee (p. 97)

In other words the world shared by chimper and chimpanzee is essentially an intersubjective one based on mutual perceptions of mindedness. Moreover this "achievement" of mindedness is essentially a social, and practical, activity. As Coulter argues "if […] intelligibility is essentially *intersubjective* [then] cognition is, in neglected dimensions, fundamentally 'practical' and tied to organizations of social activities (in analyzable ways)" (Coulter 1989: 3). Thus we can begin, as sociologists, to elucidate the practices in everyday life wherein members of society "achieve" the mindedness of the animals they share their world with.

One particular way in which we can achieve this is to address how it is that members of society come to "bestow" personality upon, and "achieve" personhood for, non-human animals. Thus, if we move away from traditional, dualist accounts of mindedness and personality to a "praxiological, constructionist account" (Coulter ibidem: 6) it is logically open to animals "having," or at the very least, "being bestowed" a personality. As Coulter argues such an approach is "radically sociological" because it places "*practices* – actions, activities, interaction – rather than *persons* at the centre of its analytical attention" (Coulter ibidem: 6).

Constructing personhood?

Individuals often work together to situate and accord personhood to those humans unable to establish it for themselves, such as the severely mentally impaired (Bogdan and Taylor 1989) or small children, even before birth (Kaye 1982). For example, in speaking for their children and interpreting their noises as intentional communication parents "accord the infant psychological consciousness and, to the extent that they attribute distinctive intentions, motives, and psychological propensities to her or him, a unique self as well" (Cahill 1998: 139). Furthermore parents do not necessarily do this alone and often enlist the help of others in this process; they "utilize the interactional labors of others" (Cahill ibidem: 139). In the same way companion animal owners often strive to attribute personhood to their animals.

As a general rule "nonhuman animals are culturally defined as a generic group and, as such, relegated to the social category of "nonpersons" (Sanders 1995: 196). This may be the view of animals as "sentient commodities" that farmers often hold (Wilkie 2005) or the view of animals in strictly utilitarian terms (Kellert 1980) that is typical to those working in the primary industries (Taylor and Signal 2006). Nonetheless, animals are culturally customarily not granted personhood. Companion animals, however, are often viewed differently, at least by their "owners" who impute personalities and other attributions of "mind" to them.

Sanders (1995) argues that many human-companion animal relationships are characterized by an emotional intensity which leads to a rejection on the part of the humans of "their animals as mindless, objectified, nonpersons. Instead, they see the animals with whom they share their everyday lives as unique, emotional, reciprocating, and thoughtful "friends" or "family members" (Sanders ibidem: 197). Additionally, through various mechanisms, they are able to achieve for their pets the status of "person" without the animal contributing the "usual interactional labor to the person production process" (Cahill 1998: 140). For example, Sanders noted that dog owners often interpreted certain aspects of their dogs' behavior as a deliberate attempt to manipulate the owner into giving the dog something he or she wanted, thus imputing motive and mindedness to their animals and granting their relationships with them a fundamental intersubjectivity (Sanders 1993).

Whilst there are a growing number of sociological studies investigating animal shelter life (e.g. Arluke 1991) few of them have chosen to focus upon ways in which animal shelter workers impute mindedness and/or personality to the animals under their care. This seems somewhat of an oversight given that animals in shelters occupy a unique, intermediary, status between sentient commodity and family member; effectively a "pet-in-waiting." It is this very status that makes shelters a ripe place for the empirical study of human attribution of personhood, personality and mindedness to animals and it is to this that this paper now turns.

Methodology

This work is based three years of ethnographic research at two animal sanctuaries in the UK. The researcher visited the sanctuaries on average twice per week spending between three and five hours observing, interacting with, and often helping, the routine business of the sanctuary. Consent for the observation was gained from the senior staff at the sanctuaries. It was then left to their discretion whether, and how much, they told to the rest of the staff. One methodological consideration, as with all participant observation, was whether my presence would significantly alter the participant's behaviour. Due to the fact that I was already well known to staff and was routinely involved in work at the sanctuary this became less of a consideration. I gained access to the organizations easily because I had worked at one of them for five years and thus had "inside" contacts. Field notes were kept, taken at the site wherever possible, and/or completed at the end of each day. In addition I also conducted interviews with a number of staff from five other animal sanctuaries/welfare organizations, bringing the total number of animal welfare organizations/sanctuaries accessed to seven. Interviews were tape recorded and independently transcribed.

I also attended the monthly public meetings of one of these animal sanctuaries for six months. The public meetings were intended to bring members of the public who had an interest in the sanctuary up to date with what was occurring at the sanctuary and be a forum for a general discussion of sanctuary business. In reality the meetings were often used to air grievances between the staff, and between supporters and staff. Field notes were kept throughout the meetings. Many members of the public kept notes during these meetings so my note-keeping was not out of place and did not draw undue attention.

A general outline of the organizations

All of the organizations were involved in caring for unwanted or lost companion animals. The main animals sheltered were dogs and cats although smaller animals were fairly common, for example, rabbits, rats and gerbils. In the larger sanctuaries goats, pigs and horses were sometimes cared for, although due to limitations of space they were relatively few in number.

The organizations fell loosely into three different categories: (i) those in which individuals worked from home with no premises for the animals and with the aid of one or two volunteers (often family members); (ii) larger "structured" sanctuaries which had premises and any number of (sometimes paid) staff and volunteers who helped to run it; and (iii) organizations engaged in specific pedigree breed rescue.

Individually run welfare centres

Individuals managing these centres did not have approved premises for their animals. Instead, they relied on a "paperwork" system whereby they would advertise in the local press for "good homes." They would then take the details of people who called wanting to adopt a cat or dog and try to match them to the people who wanted to surrender their animal(s). A system was then in place which utilised volunteer drivers who brought the potential adopter together with the potential animal. The potential adopter was then evaluated and the animal was either passed on or returned to the original owner until another potential match was lined up.

Larger, structured organizations

The second category of organisation was a much larger, "structured" sanctuary that tended to be a registered charity. They dealt with between 600 and 1500 animals each year, with a supporting staff of between 10 and 30 people. In order to adopt an animal from this kind of sanctuary members of the public had to visit in person and pass through a verbal screening interview aimed at assessing their suitability as a "good home." Dependant upon the outcome of this interview they would either be invited to take an animal away immediately or told that a worker would come to visit them within the next few days for a "home visit." Home visits were generally used when the worker who performed the screening interview was unsure about the potential home and wanted to gather further information.

Local, breed specific rescues

The third category consisted of local off-shoots of national canine breed organizations. In the UK many pedigree breeds have their own rescue societies that are dedicated to giving advice about a specific breed to those interested. This can include advice about problem behaviour, nutrition and exercise and so on. They also re-home unwanted or problematic animals. Most of these breed rescues are national charities which operate by way of local off-shoots which pick-up and drop-off animals in their areas. Data was collected by interviewing the organizers of two of these local branches.

The breed rescues worked slightly differently to the other organizations discussed, although their homing practices and policies were largely similar. Everything revolved around a centralized headquarters that would take calls from the public with problem animals, or from those who wanted to adopt an animal. They would then contact the local operator to go and vet the home or evaluate the problem. Much of the initial vetting would be done by the HQ who would only pass people on to their local organizer if they were happy with the suitability of the home.

Results and Discussion

There were a number of different techniques used by the sanctuary staff, consciously and unconsciously, to ensure that the animals under their care were taken seriously (and, as a direct corollary that their own jobs were taken seriously). The great majority of these techniques were based on their collective efforts to

attribute personhood, personality and mindedness to the animals in the shelter (and to a lesser extent to animals more generally).

Naming

All of the animals, without exception, which were brought to the sanctuaries either already had a name or were named by the staff. The names generally followed conventional naming techniques for companion animals by utilizing names typically given to humans or names which reflected a particular characteristic (either physical or psychological) of that animal, for example, Sam, Jessie, Spot, Scruffy, Tyson (after a dog who liked to fight) and so on (e.g. Beck and Katcher 1996).

Naming is an important way to establish individuality as well as a biography and thereby establish personhood. Hickrod and Schmidt (1982) argue that the very practice of naming an animal turns it into an "interactional object" (Hickrod and Schmidt ibidem: 60-61) which forms the basis of any social interaction. Phillips (1994), in her investigation of the lack of naming practices of scientists who work with laboratory animals argues that "proper names are linked to the social emergence of personality, which engenders a matrix of ideas and behaviors unique to one individual" (Philips ibidem: 123). It should also be noted that this leads directly to a sense of responsibility for those named. Philips also points out that in order to "achieve" an individual through naming the collaborative efforts of both speaker and audience are needed. This was evidenced at the sanctuaries when young, nameless, animals were brought in.

Traditionally the humans who were surrendering animals to the sanctuary were subjected to an "entry interview" whereby the staff attempted to gather as much information as possible from them regarding the vagaries of that particular animal with the idea of being able to place them, appropriately, into a new home. With very young animals they often had not been named. Immediately upon receipt of young animals one staff member would take them to settle into their kennel/cattery and another staff member would talk to the surrenderers. It was common, after the surrenderers had left, to then witness exchanges between both staff regarding the naming of the new animals whereby the first member of staff would have already, in just a few moments interaction with the animals whilst settling them, have chosen a name. If the staff member who was conducting the interview with the surrenderers had also chosen a name for the animals the first staff members choice was invariably chosen as this was seen as based on the animals personality and therefore more apt.

Philips points out that the animal technicians and scientists she interviewed, whilst not necessarily making a link between naming animals and caring for them themselves, clearly expected her to (Philips ibidem). This link was evident in the current study when discussing the practices of the council repository for lost dogs who did not name their animals. Instead they assigned them a number and operated a seven day waiting period wherein the animal had seven days to be claimed by an owner and if he/she was not then they were put up for sale. Thereafter they were held between one and two weeks dependant upon the assessment of their "homeability" and then destroyed. The staff of all the shelters frowned upon the lost dogs home because they did not adopt their animals, they sold them, and because they made no attempt to screen those wanting a dog. Additionally the lack of naming was seen as being tied to the way the home operated:

> I worked there for a few weeks but just couldn't hack it. There were so many dogs and so many of them were killed, you know. And I couldn't do with the damn numbering system. I mean an 8 week old pup isn't number 3033 he's Fred, you know? They number them so we don't get close to them cos if you do it's just too hard when they're killed, and you know they will be cos there's just too many of them.

The fact that naming an animal was considered important was underlined by the fact that those homing animals did not like a prospective adopter to refer to an animal as "it." Whilst there was a general dislike of animals being called "it," this became even more distasteful if it was used when discussing the animal they were hoping to adopt. When asked what she looked for in prospective homes one sanctuary worker explained that amongst other things:

> One of the things I really hate is when they start asking me about 'it,' you know about the dog or cat that they want and they're asking 'is it friendly,' 'does it like kids.' I know it's a little thing but it really put me off them and they have to work harder then to convince me they are good enough for one of our animals. I mean, these are our babies, you know, they are never an it.

Assumption of care

All those involved in sanctuary life took their roles as "caretakers" of the "pets-in-waiting" seriously. They felt, generally, that they did a good job under hard circumstances. There was an element of "moral zealousness" among the staff who saw themselves as a "voice-for-the-voiceless." As such they often "spoke for" the animals on two levels. Firstly, in interaction situations they literally "spoke for" the animals and secondly, on a more structural level they spoke for the rights and welfare of individual animals. A requisite part of this was the assumption of care that all workers had towards the animals. The animals were seen as their "charges," as disempowered others who needed protecting:

> It's our fault in the first place, I mean we domesticated them and now we can't even take care of them. It should be our duty to do that at least seeing as though we did this to them in the first place…..right now there are and about 300 of them are being destroyed on a weekly basis because we aren't dealing with what we've done so […]. At least here I can be sure that this dog or this cat which can't survive on its own gets to live out the rest of its life in plush surroundings. It's the least we can do.

A large part of the "missionary zeal" with which workers approached their everyday activities (Taylor 2004) was justified by the very establishing of the personhood of these animals. These animals went beyond traditional conceptions of animals as "nonpersons" into that of "potential family member" and thereby deserved the workers commitment. The assumption of care that the workers had towards the animals often manifest itself during "homing" situations or in discussions of "homing" situations after the fact. The sanctuary workers had their own "rites of initiation," that is, occasions where they had made mistakes in the re-homing process, which were shared with newcomers as a kind of cautionary tale-cum-learning technique. It was commonly assumed that until a member of staff had completed their first erroneous "homing" they were not fully fledged "homers." Despite the angst that homing often caused it was taken as one of the most serious aspects of a workers life and certain

staff members did not wish to take on the "responsibility" of re-homing, as was explained by one worker:

> I must say I never felt confident enough to take a homing from beginning to end […]. I don't have enough confidence or experience […]. It's too much of a responsibility and I worry too much all the time whether I made the right decision, I'd rather let someone else do it instead.

Those who did re-home regularly approached it with near fanatical levels of zeal and often took pride in turning down "bad" homes. As one worker explained about their manager "she's a really good homer, she turns down well over half the idiots who come here." Given that the "business" of the sanctuary was to re-home animals and given that a successful re-homing was cause for much celebration it is somewhat contradictory to view a member of staff as good at their job because of their high turn down rates. However, when put into the perspective of those who work at sanctuaries and who see their jobs as "protecting" animals from bad homes it begins to make sense. As one interviewee explained:

> People with a bad history they're turned down […] People who have given animals away in the past. One of the first questions we ask here and on the home visit is whether they've had animals before and what happened to them. It puts you in an awkward situation sometimes you know when they've recently lost an animal and they start crying on you but that's generally a good sign, that they loved their previous animal enough. Then there's others who've got the cheek to turn up here wanting to adopt an animal when they've given their last couple of animals away for pathetic reasons and they expect us to let them have one of our dogs. It's a joke.

Further evidence of the assumption of care that staff members had when re-homing animals was their belief in the need for home visits. Home visits generally took place when a staff member was unsure about a potential home following an interview at the sanctuary. The potential new "owners" were told, on occasions such as this, that it was standard practice to home check prior to releasing any animal and an appointment was made for a staff member to visit them at home. This technique had a dual purpose according to the staff members. As well as giving staff members more opportunity to evaluate the potential home it was also seen as a way of "weeding out" bad homes; that those who were bad homes would balk at the idea of a home visit and those who were good homes would welcome the idea.

One sanctuary manager explained that if time and resources would have allowed they would have made home checks mandatory. As it was they could only afford to check on those they were unsure of. The shelter manager, however, reserved the right to check on any animal once homed. This caused a significant amount of dissent with those who sat on the sanctuary Committee but did not play a role on the day to day management of the shelter. The board members considered this to be an illegal act on behalf of the manager, especially if she removed animals she thought were not being treated well and the manager chose to ignore them, to see this as part of her job. As was explained to me:

> We had this dog who was a real problem to home so one day when no one else was here he [a worker who was subsequently asked to leave] homed him to these people. We were all a bit suspicious so I decided to go and check on [the dog]. It was the worst home you can possibly imagine and there's no way these people came off as a good home on the day he spoke to them either. He just wanted to get rid of [the dog] cos he wasn't an easy

> dog. Not long after he was back with us he bit one of the workers really badly and the decision was made to put him down. No one agreed with this decision. The Committee had decided based on the manager's report on [the dog's] behaviour that he was un-homeable. None of us agreed. A few people left over this one – I was nearly one of them. You can't work in a place where a good dog gets put down just cos the manager doesn't care.

The shelter workers saw their animals as individuals, with very real personalities, who were owed a duty of care by the staff that looked after them. Furthermore they often "achieved" the personality of the animal under their care by giving them narratives and biographies which served, in turn, to justify their own zealous approach to their jobs. A key component of this was the a priori assumption of personality that was given to these animals.

A priori assumption of personality

All the animals in the sanctuaries were assumed to have personalities. They were discussed among staff with reference to such personalities. One staff member when discussing re-homing a particularly boisterous spaniel explained that "we've got to bear in mind the individual dog. Grover here hates cats ["don't you boy" to the dog] and he hates kids. I often wonder what happened to him to make him this way but he won't tell me will you lad [to the dog]?" In another instance a staff member recounted a home check incident to me "I'd gone to see this family who wanted Sarah [a cat] and I had her in the car and they'd seen her. Halfway through the interview it's clear to me they wanted her as a mouser and I thought 'no way; this girl won't cope; she's too soft to be killing things all day for a living' so I made my excuses and got out of there with her as soon as I could."

A further way in which a prior assumption of personality is evidenced was in the very paperwork the staff completed regarding the animals. During the intake interview they asked the surrenderer to describe the animals' personality and when this was met with silence or a blank look (as it often was) they prompted by saying such things as "Is she easy-going? Does she like kids? Is she high strung? Does she like new people?" and so on. If the surrenderer was unable to answer such questions or answers only briefly this was taken as further evidence that they were a "bad home" or "bad people" which was the assumption that all staff had with every member of the public who surrenders and animal no matter what the reason.

Thus, the personality of an animal is inextricably interwoven with their biography and the naming practices of staff. Furthermore their personality, name and biography are all constitutive components of their "personhood."

Establishing personhood

Personhood for shelter animals can be established in a number of ways including those outlined above. One further way in which it was created in the current study, was in the fierce protective stance many of the staff had towards their charges. One example of this was the distaste that staff members had for those who want to "buy" an animal as opposed to "adopt" one. When explaining how she "got a feel" for potential new homes straight away one staff member said:

> A good example is when they phone up and the first question they ask is 'have you got any dogs for sale?' I know some of this is ignorance about what we do but it definitely puts you off and usually with good reason.

> When I first started doing this I wasn't so cynical and thought other members of staff were totally over the top…but I soon learned not to trust what most people say to you, and I realized that if their first interest was price then their first concern wasn't the dog, they didn't want them for the right reasons.

The personhood of animals was also established in the way that sanctuary workers laboured together to create "good" animals. Their belief system stressed that it was not the animals' fault that he/she was abandoned, but that it was the human owner who was responsible. In this way animals were perceived as never being intrinsically "bad," but were seen as being "made that way" by their errant owners. For example, one worker explained the following about a dog that had actually bitten three members of staff, one of them quite seriously:

> We had a guy bring a dog in who was snapping and biting at everyone. We couldn't handle him he was way too dangerous. We ended up putting him down then later we found out he'd belonged to this druggie who fed him drugs. No wonder he was so aggressive. We only found this out after we'd destroyed him. People like that really make me mad. If he'd have told us when he brought the dog in we would have worked with the dog and sorted him out. His anger wasn't his fault it was his stupid owner feeding him drugs.

If there is no such thing as an intrinsically bad animal then it must be the fault of the owner and this belief is clung to despite evidence to the contrary. A staff member recounted the following:

> We had a dog who bounced around five or six homes with each one of them bringing him back cos he chewed and wrecked things. Well you have to start wondering at this point. We'd be pretty unlucky to have six bad homes on the run so you have to ask whether it's the dog. We were thinking about getting him into training classes when this woman came along and fell in love with him. We warned her about him but she still wanted him. Anyway three months later we go and see them and what do you know he was completely happy and very well behaved. Maybe we did just have a real bad run of bad luck with the wrong personality match up between this dog and those six homes.

In such a way, then, the "technologies of person production," which Cahill (1998: 141) refers to as the construction and compilation of "socially credible" information about "persons" which is then taken as an external fact or truth, is applicable here. This "person production" which can involve direct surveillance, information collected from the individual or information collected from those who purport to "know" the individual often leads to the establishment of a "file person," a "hermeneutic and documentary technique [which] consequently make[s] each inmate a case" (Cahill ibidem: 143). This was evidenced in the shelter workers interactional labour aimed at "achieving" "good" animals. Just as Margolin (1994, cited in Cahill 1998: 144), when investigating gifted children centre staff, found "a flattering file person waiting to be hung on them there" (Cahill ibidem: 144) so, too, the shelter workers approached each animal with a "flattering file person" to attach to them and thus explain their "unruly" behaviour. Goffman pointed out that certain social environments such as psychological institutions limit individuals abilities to achieve the status of "personhood" by preventing them acting in appropriate ways (Cahill ibidem). It may be that animal sanctuaries operate in reverse to this by making the

shelter a place where any animal will automatically be able to achieve personhood, largely by the fact that a "flattering file person" automatically awaits them, *no matter what* their behaviour.

Inextricably tied to the establishment of an animals personhood was the belief that the shelter staff were morally compelled to look after the animals well. Not only did this manifest itself in the ways outlined above but was also evident in the attitude the workers had towards the members of the public who wanted to adopt an animal. Their approach towards members of the public was generally skeptical and negative. They clearly saw themselves as gatekeepers that the public had to negotiate their way past in order to successfully be granted an animal. Those applying for animals were effectively screened a number of times. They would initially be screened over the telephone when they called the sanctuary. As one interviewee explained:

> On the phone I'd ask them enough to get an idea of whether they were OK or not. I never used to at first when I first started working here I'd just give them directions, but the kennel girls used to nag me about inviting dick-heads up, as they called them, as it would be up to them to fob them off politely which isn't always easy to do politely […] I'd say most of the job on the phone is just fending them off, telling them you don't have a suitable dog and so on.

If they managed to "pass" the telephone screening they were invited up to the sanctuary where they were subject to an interview. This was done informally whilst they were being shown round the sanctuary and ostensibly "chatting" to the staff. Following this they were either offered an animal or referred for a home visit if their suitability was in question. The shelter staff, whilst aiming to be polite at all times to members of the public, did not particularly worry about being rude to those considered "bad" homes. In one instance I witnessed a shelter manager abruptly tell a member of the public who wanted a kitten for Christmas for her daughter "our animals are not gifts; come back in the new year if you're still interested." When asked about this incident and the fact that the member of the public had left clearly quite angry the manager explained:

> Why do I care if I upset bad homes? She's never gonna get a cat from me – they're not presents they are animals. And if she bad mouths us to her mates if they think like she does then it doesn't matter, that's more people we don't have to fend off, and if they're good homes they'll understand anyway. I've lost nothing today.

This matter was then raised at the next public meeting when the shelter manager argued that the shelter should not re-home animals, except in extra-ordinary circumstances, throughout December in order to preclude those wanting animals as presents from visiting the sanctuary. The Committee disagreed with the manager who simply went ahead and instituted this rule informally anyway. The manager justified this by arguing that the Committee was removed from the day to day business of the sanctuary and that many of them were only serving on the Committee for the public recognition and not for the sake of helping the animals. Being "in it for the animals" was a common refrain among sanctuary workers, whether this be applied to those deemed good homes because they were in it for the animals or whether it be applied to sanctuary staff motivations.

In it for the animals

The staff at the sanctuaries had very fixed ideas about what constituted the "right" motives for working there and these were central to the way they categorized other staff and how they felt about them. It was often stressed that these were not personal views but depended upon the workers commitment to the job and the animals. A case in point was the arrival of a new animal manager at one of the sanctuaries. He had a long history of working in animal welfare and was seen as a welcome addition to the animal staff. He was not particularly popular, being seen variously as "bossy," a "know it all" and too rigidly inflexible in his ways. These problems were, however, overlooked, because he was seen as dedicated to the animals:

> He's not that popular really. He's a real pain, everything has to be done just so, exactly the way he wants or he hits the roof. But you can't complain really. He's miles better than [the last manager] and at least you know he's committed. He's always here, and you know, does a good job. You can see it when he's homing the dogs, there's no way these dogs are going to go to any old home, he cares you know.

All those involved in the animal sanctuaries studied subscribed to a belief system based on notions of what animals under their care needed. They judged and classified their fellow workers according to how far they met the criteria of being "in it for the animals." This notion of being "in it for the animals" was primary and often overcame personal likes and dislikes.

This belief often led to dissent amongst the staff in that, often, workers felt they were right to do whatever they wished/needed in order to facilitate the best interests of the animals. For example, a heated exchange between two workers concerning the euthanizing of a litter of newly born pups was witnessed. One worker wished to euthanize all but one of the pups to give the remaining pup and undernourished mother a chance to live, whilst the other worker wanted to take all the pups away from the mother in order to hand rear them. Both workers claimed to be acting in the best interests of the mother and both thought the others actions would compromise the mothers health and thus, that their opponent was not acting with the mother's best interests at heart. On the other side of the coin this same "moral certainty" had the power to diffuse arguments. The defense of having done something 'for the good of an animal" or "in the best interest" of the animal was not one which could not easily be overcome. In this way then the moral certainty that the welfare workers had concerning their work became a central, defining concept within their daily lives, and one which was powerful enough to represent the "last word" in all disagreements.

Conclusion

It is the premise of this paper that sociology can, and should, turn its attention to human-animal relationships and that one particularly effective way to do so is to utilize the radical sociology of the "cognizing subject" (Coulter 1989: 1) wherein "the identification and individuation of the *mental* cannot be independent of the social, cultural and historical environments of persons" (Coulter ibidem: 2). Thus, by seeing knowledge as practice (Francis 2005: 253) we can avoid what Goffman ironically called the "touching tendency to keep a part of the world safe from sociology" (Goffman 1961: 152, cited in Coulter 1989:1). This entails that we accept the view that knowledge is essentially and irrevocably socially produced and that this is only possible with the tacit agreement among members of a society or community where

such phenomena are created. The theoretical approach outlined in the current paper, i.e. a phenomenological approach, can meaningfully be utilized in this endeavour. The close attention to detail (e.g. Berger 1963) and a concentration on *how* the social comes to be in the first place (e.g. Garfinkel 1967), gives phenomenology a unique insight into human-animal relationships. This paper has shown how this applies to the establishment of the "personhood" of animals in shelters by the collaborative efforts of shelter staff. How, whilst the shelter staff never openly discuss, or otherwise appear to be aware of their actions in this regard, they still build an elaborate framework of assumptions and meanings that define the shelter animal as unique, as a "pet-in-waiting," which necessitates that humans act as a "voice-for-the-voiceless" for them.

Moreover, it may also be that the study of human-animal relationships itself opens up new modes of inquiry and thus contributes to the generation of social theory in return. For example, it may be that the adoption of such an approach to the study of human-animal relationships calls into question our reliance on post-Cartesian dualistic modes of thought. Such modes of thought are a fundamental starting point for most human-animal studies (e.g. "us" v. "them" ways of thinking) and serve to maintain the relationships of oppression and dominance we currently have with animals (e.g. Spiegel 1996). This ultimately results in an anthropocentric sociology. Studying human-animal relationships from a phenomenological perspective which sees the properties of both "human" and "animal" as performative and emergent calls such beliefs into question and leads to different ways of theorizing about the social world (e.g. Taylor 2007). Thus, human-animal studies are important for two reasons: nonhuman animals are a part of our social life and deserve attention, and, consideration of human-animal relationshionships may also contribute to advancements in social theory and therefore are important to sociology, and sociologists, per se.

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