

LOVA Workshop

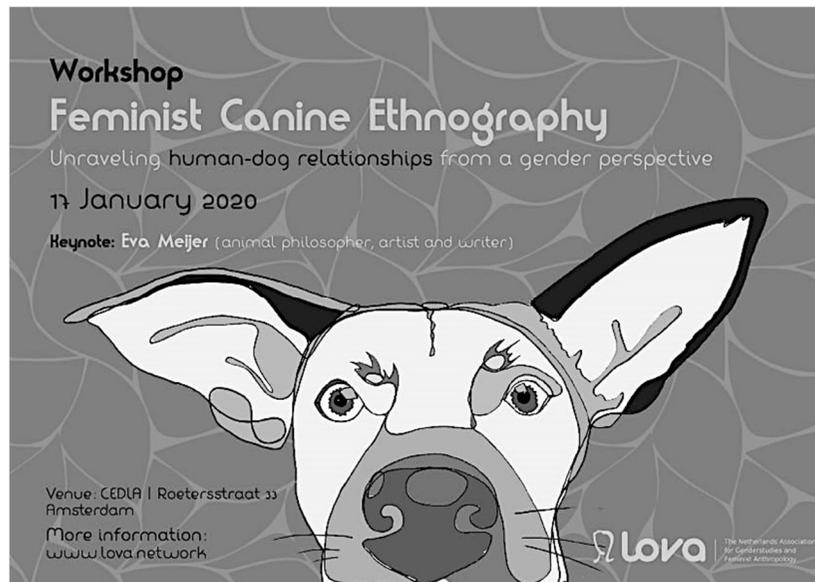
Feminist Canine Ethnography

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By the journal editors:

Katrina Holland's report below was published on the website of *Dogs Trust*.¹ We thank Katrine for allowing us to republish it in our journal. The workshop was organised by LOVA members Irene Arends and Reinhilde König and has been announced in last year's LOVA Journal. The final program contained ten presentations in three panel sessions, the workshop "Be your dog", and a keynote lecture by prof.dr. Eva Meijer. About forty people attended the event.



Ethnography "beyond the human"

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves a combination of observational and participatory techniques, utilised principally within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Traditionally an approach reserved for the study of human cultures, ethnography is today increasingly employed to explore the lived experience of the nonhuman animals (hereinafter referred to as "animals") with whom humans interact, live and work. Dogs and their relations with humans have garnered particular scholarly attention, likely due to this animal's ubiquity alongside humans around the world. However, given the anthropocentric (human-centred) bias of the social sciences, expanding ethnography's reach to incorporate dogs (or indeed other animals) as valid ethnographic "subjects" presents methodological challenges the researcher must grapple with. How, for instance, can we as human researchers, claim to "know" what a dog might be thinking or feeling?

Tackling this issue, many of the day's presentations reflected on methods for data collection that attempt to "decentre" the human subject in order to capture human *and* dog perspectives. For instance, photography was at the heart of Lee Deigaard's² (Independent Researcher and Artist) exploration of her rescue dog's interaction with the physical environment of New Orleans. Photographs, Lee explained, help her to understand space differently and come to "see the city through her." We also heard how video is incorporated into Dr Rebekah Fox³ (University of Warwick) and colleagues' work on the Shaping Interspecies Connectedness⁴ study that investigates various cultures of dog training in the UK. One advantage of using video to study this topic is the ability to capture the bodily engagements of dog and owner/trainer.

Through visual techniques that avoid a dependence on traditionally humanist research methods, such as interview, a richer understanding of human-animal interaction is possible. However, with the emphasis on sight, much of the dog's sensory experience – smell, touch, taste,

sound – tends to remain unaccounted for. One way in which researchers can help to redress this is to situate their work within an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates insights from canine behaviour research. For instance, whilst animals do not speak in a human language, findings from ethological studies of canine cognition can help us to remain attentive to the dog's perspective (both as a species and an individual).

Feminist perspectives: what can they contribute to human-dog research?

Some presentations also attended to the ways in which gender notions impact the affective relations between dogs and people. For instance, Rebekah Fox noted the gendering of UK dog training cultures by contrasting the female-dominated Guide Dogs training culture against police dog training that is largely male-dominated. Several speakers highlighted how a feminist perspective can be productive for researchers of human-animal relations by helping to challenge established hierarchies (e.g. human/animal; nature/culture) and bringing *other's* perspective of the animal to the fore. Like women, animals tend to be positioned on the side of “nature” in the nature/culture binary. Thus, addressing human-dog relations from a feminist perspective implies adopting a critical approach to the power relations that underpin one's studies.

Not only were these ideas discussed, they were *performed* too as we were joined by Rietje (meaning “Little straw”) who accompanied her human Reinhilde Sotiria König, one of the meeting's co-organisers. During an interactive workshop (“Be Your Dog”) led by Dr Angela Bartram⁵ (University of Derby) we were invited to use our bodies to call into question, and develop relationships beyond, the hierarchical categories of “pet” and “owner” and “animal” and “human.” Furniture was pushed back to the edges of the room and willing participants were encouraged to join Rietje on the ground and



Photo by Katrina Holland: The workshop “Be your dog”

to mirror her behaviour. As Rietje rolled, sniffed and lay still and silent, the group followed which highlighted the possibility for emotional and empathetic connection across species.

Incorporating dogs ethically into research

An important thread running through several of the presentations pertained to the question of how we might ethically incorporate dogs into ethnographic research. Maythe Han⁶ (University of Edinburgh) reflected on the vulnerability of the dogs in her PhD research, which

focuses on dogs and their humans in Edinburgh, and the human-centric ethics forms that precluded concern for any ethical implications of her canine participants.



Photo by Marina de Regt: All participants of the workshop

In her keynote lecture, Dr Eva Meijer⁷ (Wageningen University) also questioned how we can live well with and incorporate dogs ethically into academic study. Drawing on experiences with her rescue dogs Olli and Doris, Eva considered what kinds of community and relations dogs might want with us, emphasising the importance of taking a dogs' *individual* preference into account – rather than simply using knowledge about an animal at the level of the species. To ask what matters to them, Eva suggested we give dogs choices. For instance, a “dog door” could function as a communicative tool for a dog to make decisions about when to go outside. Wrapping up her talk, Eva proposed that taking steps to “centre” canine agency is not only

important for the dogs, but also for academic and scientific knowledge production. After all, the questions we pose to dogs determine the answers they can give.

Let me close this report with thanks to all the speakers and the organisers Reinhilde Sotiria König (Ruhr Universität Bochum) and Irene Arends (University of Amsterdam) for organising such a great workshop!

Notes

- ¹ The report was published on January 21, 2020 at <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/-feminist-canine-ethnography-workshop>.
- ² See about Lee Deigaard at <https://cacno.org/artists/lee-diegaard>.
- ³ See about Rebekah Fox at <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/foxr/>.
- ⁴ See <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/currentresearch/interspecies-connectedness/> for more information about this project.
- ⁵ See about Angela Bertram at <https://www.derby.ac.uk/staff/ang-bartram/>.
- ⁶ See about Mayte Han at <https://maythehan.com/>
- ⁷ See about Eva Meijer at <http://www.evameijer.nl/en/indexen.html>.