

2015

# Miffy and me: Developing an auto-ethnographic approach to the study of companion animals and human loneliness

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## Recommended Citation

Franklin, Adrian, Miffy and me: Developing an auto-ethnographic approach to the study of companion animals and human loneliness, *Animal Studies Journal*, 4(2), 2015, 78-115.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol4/iss2/5>

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Despite the consistent claim that companion animals can and do alleviate human loneliness, a recent systematic review of quantitative studies of human loneliness and companion animals (Gilbey and Tani 2015) found no evidence to support this 'belief' (as they put it), except in animal-assisted therapy (and even there the authors were not entirely convinced that they do). Taking their article as a starting point this paper develops a critical examination of quantitative methodologies that have been used to date and suggests that they have not taken into account the extent and complexity of contemporary human loneliness or how companion animals configure with it. This paper argues that recent advances in the understanding of human-animal relations suggests that a new form of qualitative study is needed that can focus on how relationships between companion species and humans are created and in what way these relationships impact on human loneliness. A new auto-ethnographic case study is provided in order to indicate the method and its potential value.

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## Introduction

In this article I address whether companion animals can ameliorate or reduce human loneliness. We are social animals and so are companion animals, and together we are social symbiotes, but to what extent are we interchangeable *socially* such that human loneliness might be alleviated or even cancelled by companionate relationships with other animals?

If the painful and seriously consequential effects of human loneliness (see Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2014) can be averted (perhaps even mutually) by relationships with animals, is it possible to identify what it is about them that make these relationships effective? Providing answers to these questions is by no means straightforward. There are problems defining what we mean by loneliness, there are problems measuring loneliness in humans, as well as profound problems in researching how relationships between humans and animals are created jointly and how these impact on both parties (Franklin 2012; Franklin et al 2007). This article is especially interested in developing an understanding of the kind of method we need to tackle this important issue.

In order to do this I will firstly discuss, albeit briefly, the growing mismatch between the theoretical and empirical advances that animal studies has made in respect of our ontological understanding of human-animal bonds, and the formal, largely statistical studies from epidemiology, nursing, gerontology and psychology that dominate and claim ascendance in the empirical research on human loneliness and companion species. Out of this critique a new form of research methodology will be suggested that is more apt for understanding the connection between human loneliness and human relationships with companion animals.

I will then discuss the importance of understanding the nature and sources of variation in contemporary human loneliness when addressing how companion species configure with them. Most conclusions drawn by statistical studies are confined to the study of loneliness among elderly people, whereas recent studies of loneliness have shown dramatic increases in loneliness across the life course.



Further, it will be argued that loneliness among younger age cohorts is very distinct from loneliness among the elderly. Whereas the latter is driven largely by a declining *quantity* of social bonds, immobility and poor health, loneliness among younger cohorts is driven largely by the declining *quality* of social bonds and is found among people who are mobile and often densely connected to significant domestic, community, on-line and work-based social networks (Mellor et al 2007; Baker 2012; Franklin 2012). Sociological research has shown that tangible emotional experiences of loneliness are not linked to the net sum or type of social contacts a person has, but to normative *expectations*; that loneliness is influenced by cultural norms and such things as ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild 1979; Mellor et al. 2008). Social psychologists such as Mellor et al (2008) argue that most people need a minimum number of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships that provide a sense of belonging. When these needs remain unmet, a person descends into loneliness and ‘a failure to have belongingness needs met [which] may lead to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness’ (Mellor et al. 2008: 213).

While ‘belongingness needs’ may no longer be met in the societies dominated by increasing individualism and neoliberal social organisation (Mellor et al 2007; Franklin 2012), it may also be that loneliness is now produced through changes in the quality of *embodied* relationships and expression; how we attend to one another in temporal and spatial contexts (Cacioppo et al 2009; Franklin 2012). It can be argued that changes in the quality of human social bonds in contemporary societies may have an impact in the way loneliness is self-consciously figured against inter-subjective evaluation and experience. How our sense of well-being, including belonging, inclusion, love etc. is made explicit through our inter-subjective and embodied experiences and social relations in ways that are only fully knowable through their performance; through non-verbal communication as much as the spoken word.

To a significant degree we become conscious of ourselves and our connections with others through their gaze; how we are *seen* by others (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Derrida 1999). The lonely commonly say they feel *invisible* (Peplau and Perlman 1982; Web of Loneliness 2015; Campaign to End Loneliness 2015). It is suggested that we need to discover whether the kinds of relationships humans have with companion animals involve these forms of recognition and

affirmation; whether they establish habits and practices that not only deliver ‘company’ (co-presence) but also a deeper sense of social belonging, recognition and evaluation. To that end the paper suggests possible lines of investigation and develops, in Part II, a case study to demonstrate its application and value.

Part II reports on an auto-ethnographic case study involving the author and a British shorthair cat called Miffy. This case study illustrates not only the reality and value of practices and relationships that remain unknown and unrecalled in everyday life but which are highly relevant to resolving whether *and how* companion animals may impact on human loneliness.

## Part 1 Theory and Research

On the face of it there are good reasons to suppose that modern humans and companion species are not merely co-present: for example, we co-evolved with dogs in close social proximity as social partners who developed semiotically dense communication (Haraway 2008). Many studies linked to comparative genomics and comparative psychology speak to the consequences of the long association of these two species. According to Udell and Wynne (2008), ‘Over the last 100,000 years, the social environments of domestic dog pups and human children have become more and more similar to each other, and less like those of either species’ closer genetic kin. It is as a consequence of this intense cohabitation that dogs have come to emulate some behaviours that are commonly viewed as uniquely human, such as the recognition of another’s attentional state (Franklin et al 2007). As Franklin et al (2007) note, at least one dog (Rico) acquires/learns words for objects in a manner that used to be thought restricted to growing children – and does it fast and well (see Kaminski et al 2004). Cats have lived alongside humans for c.5000 years and have also aligned their modes of communication and social behaviour with ours. Although they did not evolve as cooperative symbiotes, their domestication clearly involved (mutual) selection for social qualities (Nicastro 2004).

In recent years animal studies has established that humans and companion species relate to each other in complex ways emotionally and with affection, but does this extend to their

being in any way *interchangeable* as social subjects and therefore can they substitute in any meaningful way for those ‘absent’ humans as longed for by the human lonely? Much depends on the kind of relationships that they forge together. In the case of relationships between dogs and humans, it is clear for example, they will be neither dog nor human relationships, nor based solely on the anthropomorphic imagination of humans (See Franklin et al 2007 for a discussion of this). Sanders 1999, for example suggests that: ‘The dog owner babbling endearments to his or her canine companion is engaged in a form of happy self-delusion; he or she is simply taking the role of the animals and projecting human-like attributes into it.’ (pp. 118-119). However, we can perhaps agree with Franklin et al (2007) that ‘human agency, thought and imagination are critical to understand and inevitably play an important role in explanation ... this is not all we need to attend to, nor where the whole answer lies. This suggests that there are two other objects that demand to be investigated: the companion animals themselves and the relationship itself.’

Most species of animals constantly reaffirm their social bonds and enact rituals of belonging and these are precisely the behaviours that are extended to and exchanged *between* companion species; actively offered from both sides. So there would seem to be a *prima facie* case that if a substantial and growing form of social loneliness among humans derives from being excluded or isolated from such bonds and affirmations of belonging per se, then at least we might say that our life with companion species may offer the same emotional rewards from opportunities to give and receive social affirmation, to be a party to the formation of other social relationships.

In (replicated) studies demonstrating significant health benefits from companion dogs it was discovered that the mere presence of a dog in a patient’s household would not convey any discernible benefit. However those reporting a close relationship enjoy a very substantial benefit in relation to significant health problems such as heart disease and recovery from heart attacks (Anderson et al 1992; Headey et al 1998; Jennings et al 1999). This finding shifted attention to the nature of the companionate relationship itself. If it were merely the playing out of instinct or ‘pack behaviour’ on the part of the dog there would be little need to interrogate the relationship any further, yet as Franklin et al (2007) argued: ‘recent evidence suggests that dogs

and cats do evolve distinct relationships with human companions and that there is considerable scope for relationships to evolve in particular, dialectical and contingent ways (Haraway 2003; Bekoff et al 2002).’ In the case of either health benefits or protection/alleviation from loneliness this would suggest the need to study such relationships carefully and reactively, to understand how they are created and maintained: how they unfold over time; how they are transacted from habits, practices, conventions; how rituals are established. It is possible therefore to understand how companion species ‘shape each other in species specific ways; how they have a biography, an unfolding and a becoming’ (Franklin et al 2007:50).

Hussurl (1973) showed how these important ‘pre-reflexive’ encounters with others are notoriously difficult to recall since they are attended to so closely as they are enacted, rather than reflected on at the time and formed into coherent thoughts and memories. And since these experiences are less available to recall at later times (as reported to survey instruments, for example), it may be especially important to document such exchanges at the very moments they occur and for the researcher to place themselves *in medias res* (in the thick of things), or, in the case of respondent diary-keepers, to record what happens as it happens (Pickering 2008).

Although humans can never be perfectly sure what their companion animals are thinking or intending, the idea that they are purely deluding themselves by anthropomorphic projection is now widely doubted (see Sanders 1999:119-147 and Allen and Bekoff 2002:87-113 for a good discussion) while complex forms of mutual communication have been recorded extensively (Haraway 2003)

The benefit of companion animals to human health and well-being is a relatively well-worn research field consisting of both qualitative and quantitative studies. Although qualitative studies invariably report that companion animals do ameliorate human loneliness, for example in respect of companion dogs and homeless youths (Rew et al 2000), a recent systematic review of the increasing number of quantitative studies, largely conducted by the disciplines of epidemiology, nursing and psychology, has cast serious doubts about their accuracy. Typically, quantitative studies treat loneliness very formally, as defined by the standardised UCLA Loneliness Scale that deploys a battery of mostly proxy questions. They seldom differentiate

different causes of loneliness, investigate age groups other than the elderly or tailor methodologies to our emerging understanding of the sources of loneliness in contemporary societies. The results are understandably mixed, both in terms of their quality and findings, with Gilbey and Tani's systematic review claiming that 'none of the positive studies provided convincing evidence that companion animals help to alleviate loneliness'. There was some evidence that Animal Assisted Therapy might reduce loneliness (though it was not clear whether it related to the animals themselves, the therapy or whether the therapy connected patients to others). (Gilbey and Tani 2015)

Many of these were relatively modest investigations with small sample sizes and the systematic review did not include other studies, such as Pikhartova et al (2014), which was based on the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing data base of 5210 men and women in which loneliness among women was found to be alleviated by companion animals between Wave 0 and Wave 1 of the study. They also discovered that lonely women are statistically more likely to acquire a companion animal when they become lonely.

Although impeccably rigorous in its own terms, Gilbey and Tani's systematic review fails to highlight some key problems with the very methodologies they all uphold as most appropriate i.e. randomised sample surveys using the UCLA Loneliness Scale to measure human loneliness. First, the UCLA Loneliness Scale uses a battery of 20 questions using statements that are deemed to be proxies for loneliness (they explicitly avoid using the word lonely for fear of under-reporting) but at least 15 of its questions explicitly seek to measure inter-human rather than human-companion animal relationships (see appendix 1). Typically such studies calculate respondents' loneliness scores before and after acquiring a companion animal, but if a companion animal *did make* a difference to how lonely a respondent felt, it could only be reflected in 5 of the 20 questions, meaning that there would be 15 questions weighted against it. In other words given that the scale was designed to measure loneliness as a form of human isolation from other humans, it is a singularly inappropriate method by which to measure the possible intervention of companion species. The studies seem to be testing, somewhat absurdly, not whether companion animals are fitting social subjects, alternatives for humans maybe, but

whether their presence among lonely people repairs problematic social relationships *between humans*.

The second problem is that this systematic review does not take into account recent studies of loneliness that show that it is no longer predominantly a problem impacting on the elderly. As will be shown below, causes and circumstances of loneliness among younger cohorts mean that their sample of studies is not representative of the lonely in society.

The third problem is that these studies often demonstrate an insufficient understanding of loneliness in contemporary societies. Thus, for example in a study of whether companion animals alleviate loneliness, Gilbey et al (2006) set out to see if *separation* from companion animals *raised* levels of loneliness among a cohort of school leavers in their first three months at University. They controlled those who had close relationships with companion animals against those who did not but found no difference in their loneliness scores after their three months away from home. There is absolutely no evidence that adolescents are particularly prone to loneliness as a result of leaving a family companion animal but a great deal of evidence to show that they were prone to loneliness as a result of leaving the dense social and familial networks of their teenage years (Flood 2005; Sawir et al 2007; Baker 2012]. Here again, because researchers used the UCLA Loneliness scale what they explicitly measured before and after was not targeted on the efficacy of companion animals or otherwise, but predominantly on *human* social relationships. In both cases the assumption of the research instrument was that loneliness was an emotional state reflecting the condition only of human subjects making it impossible for respondents to respond or reflect directly on the very question at hand. It is hard to understand why a research instrument was not devised for specific use with companion animals, other than perhaps the slavish adherence to a humanist notion of loneliness and its standardised measurement as such.

Such important questions deserve a more attentive focus, perhaps after Latour's (2010) *Compositionist Manifesto*, by putting human and non-human animals together in their specific contexts as 'a topic to be carefully studied'. This of course is necessary even when surveys do find positive correlations between companion animals and the reduction of loneliness.

Following their identification of a positive association between companion animals and pathways out of loneliness from a sample survey, Pikhartova et al (2014) argue that: ‘quantitative studies can demonstrate a link between gender, loneliness and pet ownership but we need to conduct qualitative research to explore the factors that account for these relationships ... we need further research to explore the nature of the relationships between gender, loneliness and pet ownership in order to develop interventions that are appropriate, acceptable and effective’.

While there are no a priori reasons why a quantitative study could not be used to measure the differences that companion animals make to loneliness, it would seem that its design should first, take into account the conditions of contemporary human loneliness and second, understand through pilot qualitative studies how the lonely *can* be affected by companion animals. I will show in the next section that deals with the foundations of contemporary loneliness that these are not unrelated considerations.

## The foundations of contemporary loneliness

In recent years human loneliness has been discovered in new and disturbingly elevated levels in many Western societies (Franklin 2012; Beach and Bamford 2015) and all indicators suggest it is set to rise (Baker 2012). According to new reports from Age UK and the Campaign to End Loneliness, for example, around 10% of older people can be defined as ‘chronically lonely’ at any given time in the UK, which seriously increases their risk of suffering mental and physical illness (Victor 2011; Jopling 2015). These two reports warn that this number is set to rise by 50 per cent by 2028 as our ageing population increases (Age UK 2015). However, the scale of the problem is more significant than this. In Australia, for example, disturbing levels of ‘serious loneliness’ were uncovered in national surveys among all age groups and peaking among 25-44 year olds (Franklin and Tranter 2008; 2011). Several independent studies suggest loneliness is growing steadily (Franklin 2012; Baker 2012) and related not only to the vicissitudes and habitus of old age but also to the quality of human social bonds (Bauman 2000, 2003), the decline in meeting ‘belongingness needs’ (Mellor et al 2008), neoliberal work and employment conditions (Franklin 2012) and the rise in single person living (Flood 2005, Baker 2012). In 2007 Franklin

and Tranter found that 34% of Australian women and 33% of men aged 25-44 agreed with the statement: ‘loneliness has been a serious problem for me at times’.

In 2014 a perceived epidemic of loneliness also came to the fore in the UK and the USA as the cause of serious physical and mental health problems. Its association with weakened immune system, raised blood pressure, higher risk of heart attacks and strokes, and depression raised alarm bells (Perry 2014; Cacioppo, and Cacioppo 2014). Bleak statements were common: Sample (2014) reported that ‘loneliness has around twice the impact on an early death as obesity’. The strong association between morbidity and loneliness has been found in many other studies (including Caspi, Harrington, Moffitt, Milne, & Poulton, 2006; Eaker, Pinsky, & Castelli, 1992; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Olsen, Olsen, Gunner-Svensson, & Waldstrom, 1991; Patterson & Veenstra, 2010; Perissinotto, Stijacic, & Covinsky, 2012; Seeman, 2000; Thurston & Kubzansky, 2009). Cacioppo and Cacioppo document a long list of studies associating loneliness with some of the most serious indicators of illness and poor health, noting that such associations hold ‘even when controlling for other risk factors such as marital status, frequency of contact with friends and family, depression, and social support’. In 2014 then, the human social bond seemed to be in meltdown.

The causes of human loneliness are so generalised and embedded through our demographic and social structures, economy and polity that it is not at all clear whether much can be done to reverse the trend. The very conditions that we have enshrined in the name of freedom and choice (now sacred neoliberal mantras) are precisely those that undo the social bonds that once provided secure and unconditional support and belonging to most people – across all forms of social bond.

Indeed, Franklin and Tranter (2009) found that human subjects could be clear about feelings of loneliness, could describe episodes, their duration and their intensity but only around 50% of them could pinpoint the specific cause. Their confusion is readily understandable given that there had not been a decline in the type or quantum of social relationships per se but only in the *quality* of the social bonds themselves. This of course is less visible and apparent. Poignantly, victims tend to be self-blaming.



Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argued that the realm of social institutions, such as the family – but perhaps also the corporate nature of workplaces – has been zombified: social institutions and figures are still with us but they are effectively dead, no longer functioning in the way they once did, yet still haunting our dreams and aspirations. Bonds that once held us and carried us through life are now considered too restricting; too binding and we have loosened them to the point where they are largely ‘until further notice’ (Bauman 2000).

What then does it mean to belong to a family when everyone in it is doing their own thing, spiralling off into cyberspace pursuing interests not embedded in their immediate social circles? What does it mean to belong to a company when individuals within them find themselves in competition with others seeking salvation through personal metrics rather than through collective objectives, and with each other (see Bauman 2005; Bessière 2015)?

If the phenomenologists such as Ricoeur, Husserl and Merleau Ponty (1962) are right, that we only become fully aware of ourselves, who we are, our value, our *self-esteem* when reflected through the gaze and regard of others, then what if they are looking the other way (Gallagher and Zahavi 2015)? What if we are being *disregarded*? It is difficult to explain our loneliness because we are not dealing with concrete causes, but creeping absences (Bauman 2000). Social relations in the form of embodied encounters directed at them, *hailing them* is ebbing away.

So I am interested in how our sense of well-being, including belonging, love etc., is related to our intersubjective experience of ourselves and social relations in ways that are only fully knowable through their performance, through non-verbal communication as much as the spoken word. Loneliness reflects a changed consciousness of ourselves as we sense the presence or absence of the gaze and judgement of others. Online support networks for lonely people such as the Web of Loneliness (2015) and Campaign to End Loneliness (2015) agree with Peplau et al (1982) that the lonely frequently feel *invisible*, inconsequential, worthless and as though they no longer matter to anyone. They then lose their sense of self-esteem: they lose their capacity to make or hold contacts with others. Critically, animals can and do address us and we can also be made aware of ourselves through them, as in the famous case of Derrida’s Cat (Brun

2008). This was an important moment for Derrida and one that prompted his rage at philosopher's tendency to draw fundamental distinctions between humans and non-human animals (Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, Lévinas): 'They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systemic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and in a word, without a word, address them' (Derrida 1999; Sliwinski, 2010).

At the extreme we know that solitary confinement endangers all who are exposed to it. Many social animals, including ourselves fail to thrive when they are deprived of social contact, but at what point do *reduced* forms of social contact begin to unsettle us? Here Mellor's notion that loneliness can be defined as 'unmet belongingness needs' may not grasp the complete experience of loneliness since it underestimates the significance of *embodiment* to social animals. For example, the formal status of belonging is unlikely to create as much pain for those subject to solitary confinement as the pain of separation from embodied contact with others - even their jailers. Yet, in so many ways this emotional isolation accompanies the kind of experiences we have built into our everyday social lives.

Single person households have been rising steadily in the past 20 years and now account for more than 50% of all households in many Australian cities. We also know that when partners or spouses separate it can cause catastrophic periods of detachment and rejection and this now happens more regularly through the life course. Even within active intimate relationships, new career expectations and work norms increase the amount of time we spend alone and vie with the time given over to partners: we travel more to work away from home, we take more work home with us; careers create divergent social and spatial pathways, carrying us away aspirationally and physically from those whose very sight once brought us joy (Bauman 2000). Added to which, the working day, week and year have all extended.

Important changes in the performance of social relationships moderate what have been formal continuities in the institutions of home, household, family, intimacy, kinship, community, workplace and social networks giving rise to those fragmented, broken forms of social consciousness associated with loneliness.

A phenomenological perspective therefore offers an insight into why companion animals, whose performance of social relations with humans have not undergone such profound change, might offer humans a more constant series of social affirmations, a sense of connectedness and a sense of unconditional love and attachment – perhaps even forms of belonging – that have become more fragile and fugitive between humans.

It suggests that methodologies that depend on human reflective self consciousness (of the sort mobilised in quantitative surveys using the UCLA Loneliness Scale) may be less apt, *less sharp*, than those that can home in on and document the pre-reflexive fields of experience at the points of action and performance. We do not attend to these fields so much as become *absorbed* in them; reflection is overlooked in favour of the objects we perceive and an awareness of ourselves in ongoing interaction with them. Husserl said there was a delay, distance or difference between the reflecting subject and the reflected object. ‘When I reflect there is always something missing about my experience which will evade my reflective grasp’ (9). Or, as Merleau-Ponty put it, there will always remain a difference between the lived and the understood (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 76, 397,399,460) and for similar reasons Andrew Pickering (2008) advises researchers to be *in medias res* (in the thick of things), for such conjunctures are rarely possible to recall into reflective consciousness after the moment; impossible were one never there (as a researcher).

Identifying the relevant philosophical, social, spatial and intersubjective dimensions for research in this area is one thing, devising a new methodology to operationalize it is another, yet it is critical. According to Pickering the choices are between variants of humanist research and what he calls a posthumanist ‘ontology of becoming’: ‘One entails a dualism of the human and the non-human, a detachment from and domination of the latter by the former, and an erasure of time; the other entails an intermediate symmetrical engagement between the human and the non-human and an intrinsically temporal becoming in that engagement (p. 3). Following Pickering, many in human-animal studies have shifted the research emphasis from this humanist reflective register (what animals mean, documenting how humans recall and interpret their engagement with animals at unspecified period after they occur) to the very *enactment of relationships* and worlds (attending to what we do with each other; what results from that

exchange; when do we do it, who does what?) (Latour 2010; Franklin 2006a, 2006b, Haraway 2008, Thompson 2010, Wolfe 2010).

As noted above, in trying to understand how companionate relationships between humans and animals are created, Adrian Franklin, Donna Haraway, Max Travers and Mike Emmison (2007) proposed a new methodology in order to enter the social space of human-animal interaction at the very points of creation, remaining there to document how ‘relationships emerge as a result of a chain of interactions over time’ and how they ‘shape each other in species-specific ways.’ They concluded that:

‘... companion animals and humans are capable of developing, and have a propensity to develop, a symbiotic relationship that entails both social support and mutual advantage. These relationships may develop and mature over time and cannot, therefore, be deemed to have a general effect based solely on ownership itself or co-presence per se. We want to discover how such relationships develop, how they are expressed as cultural repertoires of practice and how they coalesce into a social-spatial habitus. Second, we hypothesise that the social space of this interaction provides relief, or escape from, or perhaps an antidote to, concerns, tensions and anxieties that are produced in contemporary (human) society.

It is therefore possible to imagine a research project that takes a small cohort of lonely people, perhaps some who live with loneliness from time to time and others whose lives are overwhelmed by it, in order to see what difference to their lives the addition of a cat, a dog or a bird might make. According to recent thinking in human-animal studies, such a study should seek to obtain pre-reflexive data about these ‘unfolding relationships’ from the point of action; from where and when such relationships are enacted, through a mix of observation and detailed diary keeping. The beginnings of such a project are reported in Part II below.

## PART II: An auto-ethnography of Miffy and me.

During the process of planning a pilot study for such a project a rather interesting preliminary exercise became a possibility: an opportunity to place *myself* under a similar kind of investigation. I have not experienced loneliness myself except on very exceptional occasions (a three month period of study leave isolated from my large family and the twice yearly, three week stints my partner spends in England with her elderly parents). These visits were OK when the kids were living at home but now, since my youngest left, I have found them gruelling. The first few days are great, blasting hot curries and other bloke-foods, total control of TV, unfettered scope for untidiness and sloth. But then as the days grind on I do suffer. Sometimes blindingly through the last week. So I understand the pain, and the experience is only too real. I have always tried to cope in one way: by locking myself away and working so hard I can't think about it. Yet I always do.

Knowing I would be potentially lonely again this year gave me the idea to run an experiment on the plausibility of my evolving method: I would not shut myself away in my study, I would go about my normal business but I would document in great detail how Miffy, an 8 year old British Short Haired cat, and I rubbed along together and whether spending more time with her made any difference to how lonely I became. What follows is what happened.

How would I describe my relationship with Miffy on a day-to day-basis? Under normal conditions I am at work all day and I work a fair bit at home too but Miffy singles me out for attention in the evenings when I sit down with my partner. At other times we greet each other, sometimes we play, Miffy likes to walk down the garden with me and stay with me wherever I am gardening. But besides that, she is just the family cat, and it is my partner who cares for her.

So Miffy and I were friendly with each other, I loved her as did everyone in the family, she made us laugh, she was eccentric, affectionate and homely. I had not studied her in any way and in fact one of the first things I learned once I began to document everything that happened in those three weeks was precisely, that nothing happened that I had not experienced before, and yet for the first time I was truly astonished by what did happen normally. Here is the value of

the methodology and knowing the difference between reflective and pre-reflective experience: capturing the elusive latter to inform the former.

In order to capture pre-reflective data, I needed to make sure that our interactions were as normal as possible. Of course Miffy found this perfectly easy since she did not know I now wanted to describe them in exacting detail. For my part I needed to learn how to remain spontaneous with her but then break away at certain points in order to write down exactly what had happened as a series of exchanges and interactions; notes on how we respond to each other in embodied ways. I used a mobile phone to take a random sequence of photos during periods of being together since these would record posture, regard, expression and juxtaposition that might change, depending on circumstances. I also broke away from such interactions, taking natural breaks or interruptions in order to recall and note down everything that had just happened. In this way, my data collection did not affect Miffy or me in any significant way during our time together.

### Extracts from the 'Miffy and Me' diary

Day 1: A day at home writing. Noticed that Miffy was out in the garden, looking out towards the door to the car park and drive, in the direction my partner always leaves from. She's calling to her. She was there a long time. Episodically though the day.

Day 1, 2pm: Miffy is in her vantage point in the lounge at a window that overlooks the drive and car park. This is where she waits for my partner.



*Photo 1: Miffy gazing into my eye*

Day 1 early evening: Miffy comes to me as I drink tea after dinner on the breakfast room couch. She greets me with her *whistle-purr*, [which I realised about a week later] is her special arriving sound that she makes prior to intimate times together, a two-tone sound being both a greeting, the whistle and the purr, which seems to be a comment or an expressed feeling about intimacy and pleasure about *togetherness*, with me I guess.

Miffy lies on me staring into my eyes for a long while; then she moves forward and *nails me* [another term I coined later] with her front paws. She sinks all front claws into the soft tissue at the top of my chest and neck and pulls slightly back on its anchorage.



*Photo 2: Nailing*

It's as if she is hanging on me, suspended from me a little. Well I guess she is attached to me, I feel the attachment too. She has done this before in the evening but never now. Is she missing Lynn and obtaining solace from me?





*Photo 3: Head swipe*

I look down at her looking into my eyes. She head swipes me boisterously, and for a prolonged period after this. Sudden eye contact in this position heightens her emotion and she is marking me boisterously, purring all the while.



*Photo 4: Eyes*

*Day 8: notes about eyes*

One of the first things I noticed once I began documenting all of our time together was her constant eye contact, actively searching out my eyes, holding my attention through her eyes, communicating in such nuanced ways using her eyes. For a considerable amount of the time together she likes to be looking into my eyes, at most other times I am around if she cannot maintain eye-to-eye contact she is stationed where she can see me. So she is rarely of out sight, which means she was my constant companion whenever I was in the house or garden. I became aware of this for the first time. This was new to me and it was pleasurable. She wanted to do it, evidently. I was not seeking to hang out with her, but this changed. After a while I found myself doing something I have never done before: making sure she came into my study where I worked. Thus I started to enjoy her just being there, or being there together. So I got into this

Miffy and me groove and I have to say, after a week we were inseparable, she wanted me it seemed and I wanted her back. Again, this was entirely new for me. I was suddenly reminded of something I read ten years previously by Leslie Irvine:

Cats will frequently impose themselves on people's activities to make their desire and intentions known. My cat Pusskin regularly paws at my arm for attention when I am working at the computer. Another cat, Leo, watches my husband shave. He also supervises (sic) all food preparation...Anyone who lives with cats is familiar with how they sit on reading material, making themselves the center of attention....Evidence of agency among animals helps explain why our experience of them as subjective beings is not solely the result of sentimental anthropomorphism. (Irvine 2004: 132-3)



*Photo 5a: Eyes open*



*Photo 5b: Eyes shutting*

Day 9: First thing in the morning, after her meals, after greeting her from being away, after stroking or combing her, Miffy sits tall, finds my eyes and slowly shuts her eyes and opens them again. It's hard to describe: a long deep gaze into my eyes, followed by a slow opening and shutting of her eyes. It is performed in multiple sets. This is like a ritual, at marked moments of pleasurable exchange with me. She seems to me to be expressing a very direct comment, pointedly directed to me and held there for a substantial period. I have found myself brought up by this before. It is a time of locking in together. A kind of eye conversation.

Her eyes also show me she is playful and wants to play. A sustained stare from me at other times can make her jittery, she waivers between a look of concern and a display of pleasurable excitement. It typically resolves with her deciding it's a play stalk. I am fairly sure thinking back that in doing this I was copying something she initiated when she was a kitten.



Another reciprocated habit, initiated by her. Whereupon she charges around, animated as she releases the tension and excitement, hiding and making bold mock charges but breaking off to hide again. Play. I do not know who enjoys this more.

*Day 10: Note about our play — there are no spectators here!*

If for any reason I am down at ground level, I do press-ups and other floor exercises every day, for instance, Miffy will walk up to me slowly and *stalkingly* and stare into me eyes, with totally dilated eyes. This I have realised often means fear but it triggers boisterous play too. If I do not start playing in the middle of press-ups she will paw at me to wake me up to the situation and if I don't respond she bites my head! She thinks I have come to play with her, or that she can get me to play. And that's because I always have.



*Photo 6: Settee gazing*

Day 11, evening: In the evening during our last two hours of the day, from 8pm until 10pm she climbs onto my lap. I would never have noticed this but she does not sit randomly on me, to maximise comfort, never in her curled sleeping-alone positions, nor does she ever shift position once there, but she always faces me, lying in a straight line on my chest and abdomen and despite the time and the quietude of this time of day and my restful body she never falls asleep, she is looking at me constantly mostly, almost exclusively into my eyes. Every night it has been the same. She is merely gazing and she will do this for hours. There are two variations of this settee gazing:



*Photo 7: Close gazing*

One is where she stretches out her legs either side of my neck and puts her face very close to mine, still eye gazing. Sometimes if I look down at her very directly and hold my look she will do this in response. The other variation is to roll onto her side and look up at my eyes upside down. She seems to get energised by doing this; it's more sensual and playful maybe? She has never once fallen asleep on my lap during this period of vobervation. I would never have guessed this after eight years of living with her.



*Photo 8: Entranced?*

Her eyes are relaxed during all phases of settee gazing except the last where her eyes become narrowed and darkened and trance-like. Her body becomes ultra relaxed, flattened, her mouth loses its square alert shape to become more pointed and kittenish-seeming. Her head seems tiny when normally it seems imposing and large.

After just a few nights of this I also realised that there were changes in me too: so that instead of my usual anguish at this specific time, just before bed, a heightening of sadness, missing my partner and family, feeling alone, I was simply relaxed and sleepy. Quite content with my lot. Even when I worked myself to a standstill in years before, I still had to run the gauntlet of that moment every night.

Day 12: Miffy snores incredibly loudly, in a wide range of unpleasant and bothersome tones and tremulations. Hence I could not sleep if she were in my bedroom, though at various points I wanted her to be there. Perhaps if I lived alone permanently I would simply use earplugs, because I sense there's a source of great comfort there. I was never aware of that before.

Day 13: The pleasure of looking forward to seeing her in the morning! I get a lift seeing her!! This is also a new thing.





*Photo 9: Feeding Miffy*

*Day 13: note about our daily round*

Had I been asked what Miffy did during the day, I would probably have said, just random things, I could name typical things she did. If I had been asked what she did with me during the day it would have been the same. Randomness. I might have said that she seemed to just be hanging about, looking bored, sleeping.

Nothing is further from the truth. She has very definite moods and activities that characterise her day and along with that, a strong pattern of interactions with me.

When she wakes up she greets me, marks me quickly, but is quickly reminding me she is hungry and quite desperate to be fed.



*Photo10: Sunbaking in front of heater*

After eating she sleeps but before that she finds her great pleasure: sun. She knows where all the sunny spots are during the day. Failing sun she is just as happy sunbaking 1 cm from an electric panel heater, which she attends with great devotion during winter.



*Photo 11: Study sofa with coat*

Then when I worked in my study she always slept in my study on my sofa and I gave her a warm woollen and expensive Boss jacket to lie on. Unthinkingly, I wanted her to be comfortable, but I do not believe that before this time I would have given her an \$800 jacket to cover in her constantly moulting fur.

At other times during the day there are moments when I did housework, gardening or ate. Miffy would always follow me and be with me. I began to notice this and I began to talk to her too. I have always talked to her but this increased exponentially as the three weeks progressed.

*Note from day 14:* As I moved into the kitchen to prepare lunch, Miffy followed me from the study and when we arrived into the kitchen we looked at each other. I said I would give her some lunch soon and then told her I had fresh finely sliced leeks, with carrots, cauliflower and chillies that I was going to microwave lightly in balsamic and eat with lemon aioli and fried calamari. I am talking to Miffy a lot now. During this time, and always during these transitions she marks the walls, edges of kitchen furniture, but not before she had taken a sample of my scent from hands or feet (socks, slippers) or clothing. Whatever area we are in. I know from reading Lucy Davis's (2011) work on secret (night) cat feeders in Singapore that cats have a very definite sense of their group and group belonging and that this can include humans. The cats in Singapore know who is trusted and not trusted by whether they carry the scent of the entire group, which is their group identity. This is how they are able to avoid pest controllers so effectively. But equally, whether you know this wider knowledge about their sociality and forms of group solidarity or not, it was possible for me to see how Miffy carried our joint scents onto different areas of our habitus and made them *ours*. So I was getting a strong sense of the us-ness, and of Miffy's active role in establishing and constantly reaffirming it. She was not marking territory with *her* scent; she was making it with both of our scents. Again, here is an instance of reflection that was made possible by being absorbed and noting precisely what was happening, in what would normally be pre-reflexive experience.



*Photo 12: Alarm call*

Day 15: I notice Miffy's *simultaneous* attention to me, us, as well as the outside world. Her intensity of focus on me/us is matched by her incredible watchfulness and distrust of the world external to us. As she settle gazes I noticed her ears tracking outside sounds and since we live surrounded by bush, there are a great many. But I came to understand that I could understand what was going on outside since, roughly speaking, her responses were divided into uninteresting sounds that did not need a response: a wallaby thumping along the lawns, or possums scrabbling up trees; the sound of small mammals of interest to her (mostly mice and rats, but birds during the day too) and noises that she could not place, and therefore did not seem relaxed with. What you cannot see from this picture is that in addition to pointing directly at the origin of the disturbance (the meter reader using an infrequently used gate in this case) she shifts her body very violently but quietly, so that one is instantly aware of it. This dramatic



body shift is communicative. Were she alone it would make no sense to do this, but she is clearly alerting *me* to something as well as attending to it, absorbed in it. She is aware that we are a we. And so am I now.

I am not a very nervous person, but one does have a heightened sense of being at risk when alone. So as I homed in on Miffy's acute awareness of sound and her communication of it to me, I began to feel we were together in relation to the outside world and that she was as useful to me as I was to her. She cared about our common space, our home, and worked constantly to be aware of anything that might disturb our peace. My hearing is not what it used to be (too many loud bands) and Miffy's hearing and sight is infinitely better than mine. This is a comfort to me and must surely be a comfort to anyone who lives permanently on their own.



*Photo 13: Miffy and I (waving goodbye)*

## Conclusion

My three-week exercise is of course merely an exercise, a pilot sketch. In itself it is of little value, either substantively or argumentatively to the debate about companion animals and human loneliness. I am not making a case for it as evidence though I will say, in passing, that my experience made me think it more likely that cats can reduce loneliness. Before I started I was open to the idea but was not sure about it. Maybe most people discover this spontaneously. At the end of three weeks I had not been lonely once; except maybe a little bit in the first few days, before Miffy and I started to hang out together more.

But I am more aware of the dimensions and modes by which our relations with companion animals might reduce loneliness, by virtue of the method I used to gather pre-reflective experience. This is NOT to say that their benefits do not enter our consciousness in the normal run of experience. It's just that without such access to pre-reflective experiences we might find it rather hard, as respondents in research, to be precise about how our companion animals make a difference to our loneliness. I am also convinced by this experience that we cannot treat animals such as cats as automata as some randomized controlled studies do. Miffy's performance was cat-like yet *personal and particular*: not entirely given by her species and so the mere presence of a cat, as 'the universal cat' (as with 'Derrida's Cat') is irrelevant here. It is what happens with any particular cat and human that matters (Sliwinski, 2010; Bruns 2008). And as Haraway (2006:103-4) pointed out, Derrida's well intentioned critique of philosophical, literary and mythological views of cats fell short of the 'simple obligation of companion animals': 'he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back'. By studying what happens in those cases where loneliness is ameliorated we may be in a better position to learn how to make it work out for more humans and cats. Because the other thing I think I learned here is that cats may experience loneliness too, irrespective of whether we give it the vet-psychology term 'separation anxiety'. I believe that they are social and personal. I am completely sure that Miffy was missing my partner and I was a great comfort to her during her absence.

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## Appendix 1

### **UCLA Loneliness Scale Questions**

1. I am unhappy doing so many things alone
2. I have nobody to talk to
3. I cannot tolerate being so alone
4. I lack companionship
5. I feel as if nobody really understands me
6. I find myself waiting for people to call or write
7. There is no one I can turn to
8. I am no longer close to anyone
9. My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me
10. I feel left out
11. I feel completely alone
12. I am unable to reach out and communicate with those around me
13. My social relationships are superficial
14. I feel starved for company
15. No one really knows me well
16. I feel isolated from others
17. I am unhappy being so withdrawn
18. It is difficult for me to make friends
19. I feel shut out and excluded by others
20. People are around me but not with me