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Interviewing animals through animal communicators

Potentials of intuitive interspecies communication for multispecies methods

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ABSTRACT

Animal communicators worldwide employ intuitive interspecies communication (IIC) to engage in detailed, two-way communication with non-human animals. IIC's potential for doing research *with* rather than *on* animals has insufficiently been tapped into, due to contingent onto-epistemological biases. Cooperating with animal communicators as interpreters, I executed pilot interviews with felines. Challenges included clearly filtering the animals' voices and bridging ontological divides and communication modes. Nevertheless, the interviews produced clear, distinct and consistent responses, challenging and confronting both animal communicators and the researcher to reflect on their perspectives, expectations and assumptions. Engaging animals as research participants through IIC simultaneously unsettles hierarchical divides between humans and other animals, as well as between different ways of knowing. IIC can support researchers and (non-)human participants in the co-creation of novel methodological multispecies strategies that form a practical counterpart to the largely theoretical explorations of the ontological and species turns, and further multivocality in academia.

Keywords

Multispecies methods; interspecies communication; intuition; animal communicators; decolonization of knowledge; human-animal relations; ontological turn; Indigenous paradigms

Introduction

Recently, there have been urgent calls in a variety of fields to strengthen multispecies methods (Buller, 2015; Gibbs, 2019) and 'listen' to the 'voices' of non-human animals[1] (Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013; Hamilton & Taylor, 2017; Hovorka et al., 2021). However, approaches to access the views and experiences of the non-human are still lacking (Dowling et al., 2017; Greenhough & Roe, 2019; Roscher, 2012; Taylor & Hamilton, 2014) and how to speak with and for non-human others remains one of the most pressing problems in multispecies research (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). At the same time, a rising interest in

[1] Although humans are animals too, for readability I hereafter refer to non-human animals simply as animals.

Indigenous[2] paradigms, decolonisation of academia and cognitive justice (Hoppers, 2001; Santos, 2014, 2018; Visvanathan, 2011) are opening up new avenues to understand and employ non-dominant ways of engaging with other species.

My research focuses on intuitive interspecies communication (IIC), which has been employed worldwide in efforts to engage in detailed, two-way communication with animals. I pose IIC may hold important resources for doing research *with* rather than *on* animals, which have not yet been tapped into by academia due to contingent onto-epistemological biases (Barrett et al., 2021). Thus, I have set out on a methodological adventure in cooperation with established animal communicators from Europe and Africa to explore the potentials of this technique in the development of multispecies methods.

Data for this ongoing study have been obtained through participant observation, video-assisted recordings, interviews and focus group discussions during animal communication courses, individual consultations and rituals in South Africa, Zimbabwe and the U.K., involving IIC experts and their students from more than a dozen countries with Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds. It involved a wide variety of animal species, with mammals and birds being most prominent. Furthermore, I worked with a large number of books, websites and video courses by animal communicators worldwide. Acknowledging that human and animal perspectives are entangled and emerging, and cannot be fully disentangled, my objective is to establish a foundation for dialogic multispecies methods (DMM), a set of conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches and tools to engage with the views and ideas, wants and experiences, understandings and knowledges of animals in academic research, and work with them as full research participants.

The four pilot interviews discussed in detail here, took place within the context of this larger study. They were executed with felines at Tsau! White Lion Reserve, including participation of two white and one tawny lion (*Panthera leo*) who live and hunt in the nature reserve, as well as a domestic cat (*Felis catus*). These specific individuals were chosen due to their high engagement, and clear and valuable contributions to IIC courses and teaching situations that took place at Tsau! over the past years, as assessed by the animal communicators involved. Moreover, they allowed us to receive input from wild as well as domesticated individuals within the larger animal family of *Felidae*. Unlike the more than 50 other animal communication events observed and recorded, these four IIC sessions modelled an interview setting where I, as a researcher asked the animals involved questions to access their perspectives on IIC, communication with humans, and their participation in academic research. The interpretations were done by two animal communicators, Wendy[3], a white South African, and Sita from the United Kingdom, who were selected because of their long term international reputation as highly effective animal communication professionals and teachers. They employed IIC to translate the responses into English (they are both native speakers), and mostly worked in tandem so that results could be triangulated. The interviews were video recorded in order to enable the analysis of audible as well as visible signs, and coded for content using ATLAS.ti.

[2] I approach Indigenous 'not as a stable point of reference or remnant of the past, but a subject position that is actively claimed and enacted in the present' (Schramm, 2016, p. 133). I take into account that modernity is cultural, dynamic and existent in multiple forms (Eisenstadt, 2000; Wijngaarden 2020), and Indigenous societies cannot be seen as static or homogeneous. Thus, instead of approaching Indigenous and non-Indigenous as binary opposed, reproducing a deceptive modernist ideology (Latour 1993), I see them as intertwined notions that bring each other into being through an assemblage of inter-reliant contrasts as well as continuities.

[3] All names are pseudonyms. The animals are referred to by their species because their permissions and preferences with regard to the use of their human given names have not been obtained.

After explaining how IIC has been approached in the academic literature, I will describe three developments that make it necessary to further reconsider dominant views. After outlining the problematic history of academic interviews with animals, I will go into the results of interviewing them using IIC. I will unpack the main challenges encountered when working with animal communicators as translators, and finally outline what the value of IIC in academic research can be.

Research into IIC

IIC is a communication technique that 'draw[s] on a diversity of intuitive capacities … includ[ing] the mutual, direct exchange of visceral feelings, emotions, mental impressions and thoughts, embodied sensations of touch, smell, taste, sound, as well as visuals in the mind's eye' (Barrett et al., 2021, p. 151). Exchanges can occur between beings that are in direct physical proximity, but also over large distances because they take place 'without the need for proximal visual, auditory, olfactory, voice or other cues humans normally associate with direct interactive communication' (Barrett et al., 2021, p. 151). In a variety of Indigenous and other non-dominant contexts, this kind of communication is considered a common practice that is integrated in and supported by local ontologies (Callicott, 2013; Deloria, 2006; Kohn, 2007, 2013; Michell, 2005; Watts, 2013) and it is used by animal communicators worldwide (Barrett et al., 2021).

In mainstream academic contexts, intuitive exchanges are often not formally recognized, even if some scholars argue they are quite a common experience (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999; Sepie, 2017), and it has been acknowledged that intuition is an integrated aspect of knowing (Sternberg & Davidson, 2002) for example when diagnosing and treating illness by medical professionals (Fox et al., 2016) and even in the academic research process (Fitzpatrick, 2017; Rivoal & Salazar, 2013; A. N. Whitehead, 2010 [1967]. Blenkinsop and Piersol (2013) describe that, although experienced more widely, intuitive communicative exchanges with other species have generally been considered exclusively as part of the culture of a Southern, often Indigenous, 'other'. A growing number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike criticize how these and other experiences that challenge the limits of Cartesian logic are mythologized as symbolic or discarded as beliefs, outlining how historically Eurocentric ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies have marginalized alternative ways of knowing and being (Abbott, 2021; Harvey, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013; Sepie, 2017; Watts, 2013).

Even if increasingly recognized and valued in the fields of animal behavior, cognitive ethology, environmental science, anthropology and religious studies, research on intuitive connections and communications with other species beyond Indigenous contexts (e.g. Erickson, 2014; Erickson et al., 2016; Sheldrake & Morgana, 2003; Sheldrake & Smart, 2000) often continue to be received with 'skepticism, even disdain' (Hurn, 2020, p. 10) in mainstream scientific communities. Hurn (2020, p. 10) attributes this to science's historically contingent 'desire for objectivity and a persistent fear for anthropomorphism'. This stance risks 'anthropodenial', which inhibits a careful understanding of animals as well as humans, as opposed to a carefully informed and often empathically generated 'animalcentric anthropomorphism', which aims to enter the animals' perspectives (de Waal, 1999). Although the use of empathic approaches to access animals' voices and perspectives has been highlighted widely (de Waal, 1999; Despret, 2016; Haraway, 2008), IIC has been strikingly absent in discussions of multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Ogden et al., 2013). It only appears in a summary of the field of human-animal communication in *Annual*

Review of Anthropology, where Kulick (2017) approaches animal communicators rather derisively, however highlighting that not enough research has been done on them.[4]

Novel incentives to understand IIC

I argue that the dominant approach to IIC as an exotic and purely symbolic belief of Indigenous or non-scientific peoples needs to be further reconsidered by highlighting developments in the world; in natural and social scientific research findings; and in approaches to academic theory building. Firstly, a growing number of individuals from non-Indigenous backgrounds practice IIC worldwide. Many have come to work professionally as paid consultants, being referred to as animal communicators. They engage with wildlife as well as domesticated animals, mostly to assist in resolving conflicts between animals and humans; understanding problems with animals' behaviours and health; and tracking lost animals. Animal communicators have been visibly present at least since the 1970s, most prominently in North America, Europe and South Africa, but also in Australia, Asia and South America (Barrett et al., 2021). Recently their popularity has boomed, especially due to media featuring famous individuals such as South African Anna Breytenbach (Thiyagarajan & Foster, 2012) English Pea Horsley (TEDx, 2017) and a variety of other animal communication experts and researchers across the globe (Pitschen, 2018). This has led to a steady rise in IIC courses, codes of ethics, certification programs and training institutions (Hafen, 2013; Vittitoe, 2005), such as the Sedona International School for Animal and Nature Communication (since 1997) and Animaltalk Africa Academy (since 2004). A survey of animal communicators' books (almost 200) and websites (400) shows they come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, up to PhD levels, in fields from business to fine arts, psychology to education, and homeopathy to veterinary technology (Barrett et al., 2021; Zmud, 2021). Although outsiders often characterize their abilities as a 'gift', animal communicators themselves consistently teach that they engage in forms of interaction that are essentially accessible to all humans (e.g. Getten, 2002; Horsley, 2018; Kinkade, 2005).

Secondly, the argument that humans and other animals only differ from each other in degree and not in kind is increasingly taken seriously (Andersson Cederholm et al., 2014; Meijer, 2016; Wels, 2015). We no longer speak of a few exceptions of specific cultural and communication practices of other primates, because intelligence, self-awareness, emotions, reflexive thinking, the capacity to form meta-representations, complex social lives, cultural traits and language have been documented in an increasing variety of animals (de Waal, 2017; Proctor et al., 2013; Urbanik, 2019). Over the past decade, findings have accumulated in the natural science fields of animal behaviour and cognitive ethology, with regard to other-sensory and sometimes seemingly extra-sensory abilities of a variety of animal species (Hurn, 2020; O'Connell-Rodwell et al., 2006) as well as the intricate communications and social interactions between non-human species, including plants (Mancuso & Viola, 2015; Simard, 2021). The 2012 *Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness* drawn up by neuroscientists, states there is convergent evidence that a wide variety of animals, including 'all mammals and birds, and many other creatures' possess the 'neurological substrates that generate consciousness' (Low et al., 2012, p. 2), but lack the opportunity to communicate their internal states to humans. In order to solve this problem, multispecies researchers have called for incentives to utilise techniques beyond the established academy 'to supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of

[4] See Kulick (2021) for an update.

what constitutes a research subject' (Whatmore, 2002, pp. 606–607). I, together with a research group at the University of Saskatchewan, argue that IIC may be a valuable key in unlocking these processes (Barrett et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the social scientific developments of the ontological and species turn have created a space in which cross-fertilizations between Indigenous paradigms, and novel theoretical frameworks like new materialism and posthumanism can take place (Rosiek et al., 2020). This has created a context in which IIC has become accessible in new ways theoretically. Being partly developed through (reflexive) engagements with contrasting, non-dominant epistemologies and ontologies, many of the theories that have fueled the ontological and species turns have strong parallels with the worldviews and paradigms of a variety of Indigenous people. This includes perceiving the worlds of humans and other species as interactive and indivisible, challenging dominant assumptions about personhood, nature, culture, agency, and research itself (High, 2010; Ingold, 1994; Rival, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 2004; Watts, 2013), for example by recognizing more-than-human agency, centralizing relationality, placing I/we relations above I/you relations and calling for accountability (Chilisa, 2012; Goduka, 1999; Wilson, 2008). These worldviews are congruent with relational approaches of new materialist and posthumanist ecological thinkers who critically interrogate the presupposition that the world is made up of distinct bodies which interact in a field of space and a flow of time. The quantum physics inspired notion of entanglement, which has become so popular in these scholarly circles, parallels with the teachings in Indigenous paradigms in that it fundamentally challenges the idea of a detached observer, describing the impossibility to disentangle the human as observer of nature, from the human as part of nature. As Indigenous paradigms pay tribute to the dynamic interconnectedness between the observer and the observed, and between being and thinking, sometimes explicitly denying the separation between ontology and epistemology (Watts, 2013), they resonate with for example Barad's (2007) onto-epistemology in which thoughts 'matter'. This provides incentives to take IIC seriously, and engage with it more deeply in academic contexts.

Problems with interviewing animals

In the past, findings with regard to the consciousness, intelligence and reflexivity of animals have inspired far-going scientific experiments that resemble conversation and interview situations, most prominently with a wide variety of primate, catecean, elephantidae, but also other mammal and avian species. Famous early examples are studies with chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos (e.g. Washoe, Nim, Sarah, Lucy, Koko and Kanzi) using signs, tokens or lexigram boards (Gardner & Gardner, 1969; Patterson & Linden, 1981; Savage-Rumbaugh & Lewin, 1994) and African grey parrots (e.g. N'kisi and Alex) who learned hundreds of words and created thousands of original sentences (Pepperberg, 2009b; Sheldrake & Morgana, 2003). Ongoing examples are soundboard using pets investigated by the Comparative Cognition Lab at the University of California (e.g. the dog Bunny), and studies in the emerging field of Animal-Computer Interaction (Mancini et al., 2017). The ability to process and exchange detailed, multifaceted information has been recorded amongst a wide variety of other animals, from whales to honeybees (Menzel, 2019; H. Whitehead & Rendell, 2015). However, their expressions are often not lingual, and it may be complicated to (teach them how to) transfer their expressions in a way that humans easily perceive and process.

This pinpoints a problem in the execution of these studies, because they generally involve an imposition of human language on other species, and a lack of opportunity for the

animals involved to express themselves on subjects and in ways that are of importance to them (see also Despret, 2005, 2016). For example, when Alex unexpectedly died, Pepperberg expressed that the bird had been the victim of scientific protocols, because he was asked the same questions over and over, and for the sake of objectivity and experimental rigor, she had kept a social and emotional distance from him (Pepperberg, 2009a). Both Pepperberg and Patterson report that their animal participants were often more interested in interactive communication with their human companions rather than scoring high on (double-blind) tests, and deliberately and consequently underperformed as a result of dissatisfaction with (social) circumstances. Patterson writes that lack of relationship, due to objective experimental designs that focus on language abilities, have often obstructed performance in her field of study (Patterson & Linden, 1981).

In studies of the communication between humans and other animals, there has been a biased anthropocentric focus on certain selected human capacities and interests, including language in the form of verbal expressions; certain indicators of culture; and the transmission of 'objective' information, while (largely) disregarding relational and affective forms of sharing, such as emotions, visions, visceral impressions and embodied sensations. Thus, a certain dominant (i.e. human, white, rational) understanding of the world has been taken as a measure to gauge the capacities of other animals. Despret (2016), who has pointed to the detrimental influence of anthropocentric approaches and scientific operations and routines in research with animals more widely, poses that we may hear new voices if we engage in different (ways of asking) questions.

Interviews with animal communicators as translators

Interviewing animals by using animal communicators as interpreters disrupts a variety of assumptions that underly dominant Northern ontologies, anthropocentric approaches and Cartesian legacies, making it possible to question how these may have limited our ability to observe and understand meaningful human-animal exchanges. The interviews I executed, came about as a result of the dynamic development in the field, as I adopted an ethnographic, collaborative approach with the animal communicators involved. I aimed to make space for co-creative spaces of co-becoming (Haraway, 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) where new forms of knowing can be born, that belong neither fully to the research participants nor to the researchers. As reflexive agents, both the human and non-human beings involved were welcomed to influence processes, and come to new understandings of (the value of) their own and others' practices and knowledges, learn new skills and ideas through the encounters, and be changed by them (Davies, 1999).

The animal communicators received my idea to involve animals as interviewees with a careful reluctance as to whether such an approach would be successful, explaining they are used to communicate with animals mostly related to practical affairs, for example, asking 'where are you feeling pain?' 'what makes you aggressive versus so-and-so?' 'what do you need to feel happy in your home?'. A lot of these questions originate in a human need to affect the behavior of the animal, and although some are addressing the animals' inner lives and emotions, they are not meant to access their wider set of opinions or worldview per se.

Besides an extra consent procedure, scheduling of the communication and an experimental engagement in asking different types of questions, the interview sessions were largely structured as common animal communication sessions. When starting the conversation, the communicators would take time to quiet their mind and connect with the animal, asking for their permission to commence the communication. Once obtained, I would

ask questions from a list following the conventions of a semi-structured interview. As is common, the animal communicators would receive the answers in a variety of ways, sometimes combining several impressions. To most animal communicators, responses come in the form of mental images (sometimes a moving image), while some audibly hear the responses in words. Sometimes there are other physical sensations involved, like the sensation of water on scales, pain in a certain limb, or a feeling of anxiety (for more detailed descriptions, see Barrett et al., 2021). The animal communicators described this embodied information verbally, and sometimes with movements and gestures, which were in turn recorded on video.

The animals generally showed engagement as interviewees, allowing the animal communicators to produce coherent and insightful responses that could be transcribed and analyzed as any human-to-human interview. One of the ways in which the effectiveness of the communications became apparent, was in their provision of consent or lack of consent. Although roaming freely in a huge reserve, after an animal communicator had given them a preparatory explanation, most animals let themselves be encountered with more ease than on other days spent in the reserve. For example, the domestic cat we interviewed was normally not present near the house during the time of day we did the interview. However, she showed up inside the room where we waited for her, sitting in the open doorway for circa 15 minutes during our preparations to start the interview proper. Moreover, as the first question was asked, she got up and walked inside to lie down in the middle of the room, the animal communicator conveying that 'she liked that question'. As in work with human interviewees, there were also instances in which animal respondents were not as open to being interviewed, having other priorities in the moment. This was clearly indicated by the way they physically positioned themselves out of clear view, and unanimously conveyed by the animal communicators, for example when lions were occupied with their social issues as a result of breeding season.

Challenges in the interpretations

Highly reputable, long-standing animal communicators normally receive competence through training, experience and ethical certification, allowing them to translate conscientiously and with skillful precision. Nevertheless, when engaging them for academic interviews there are some important challenges which I will unpack below. These include distinguishing clearly and explicitly between their own, the animals' and other voices, as well as bridging ontological divides and modes of communication.

When working with animal communicators as interpreters in academic research, they should receive the appropriate instructions and training on the relevant academic translation protocols. As is common among interpreters or research assistants with little experience in translating academic interviews, animal communicators' habitual translations are often more focused on synthesis than on literal translation. Furthermore, they sometimes expand the translations with their own interpretations and background knowledge, for instance by providing further context, but in the process causing the boundaries between the respondents' and their own views to blur. After having been sensitized to these issues, the animal communicators I worked with more frequently added footnotes to their translations and clearly separated their own voice. At times they indicated when distinctions were difficult to make, for example adding 'I don't know if that is me or him quite honestly'. When working in tandem, the animal communicators sometimes questioned each other to increase clarity regarding selected details. In these processes it became clear that, although translation and

interpretation always involves a certain blending of voices, this issue is further complicated in IIC contexts. This is most importantly because many of the interpretations take place from a non-lingual to a lingual realm, which requires a less literal-mechanical, more interpretive translation effort.

Related to this is another challenge that is amplified when using intuitive strategies. The animal communicators sometimes expressed it can be difficult to filter the 'voices', especially with more humans being present. This can be compared to how noisy environments can obstruct translations when working with spoken word, the translator being unable to clearly isolate the voice of a certain individual, due to interfering sounds. However, non-verbal communications, in which feelings in the body and images in the 'mind's eye' are used, may be more susceptible to interferences. Moreover, the animal's signaling is mostly quite subtle as compared to humans, sometimes challenging the animal communicator to 'hear' them if they are simultaneously exposed to 'loud' human signals. Furthermore, as is the case in some Indigenous communities, the idea of agents (i.e. humans or other animals) as fundamentally separate and independently acting and thinking 'persons' which is instilled in the dominant academic worldview, is not necessarily straightforward or consistent with the ontology of the animal communicators (or for that matter, the animals). Primordial reflections upon these issues did take place in conversations with and between the animal communicators, and need to be addressed more deeply in future research.

Another challenge that the animal communicators outlined, is that what was expressed by the animal at times surpassed their own understandings, so that it was difficult for them to translate the full response in detail, much like an interpreter sometimes struggles to translate the ideas of people who have a diverging linguistic or cultural background. Again, this difficulty is amplified because in IIC the communication often necessitates the translation from a non-linguistic to a linguistic realm, like in the interpretation of situations or symbols. An example is how Wendy translated an answer from a lion to the question if people are on the right path:

> He is showing me this, these two [pause] it feels like there are two paths and people are choosing one way or the other. He doesn't say which is, if it is right or wrong… I can just see this, it's almost like a line of ants walking and then separating… Whatever that means.

Sita explains that sometimes it's

> more a feeling, more an awareness, that's beyond words. I feel sometimes we feel it is necessary to put something word-less into words…. I might find a whole string of words to actually answer the question, but for the moment the answer is no answer, no verbal answer.

These challenges of translation are further complicated by the fact that the information that is received in the communication often arrives with great speed. A typical experience found amongst animal communicators all over the world (e.g. Getten, 2002; Horsley, 2018; Kinkade, 2005), is that information often comes to them on the brink of the question. Wendy

expresses she receives it 'almost before the question is being asked'. Moreover, if visual or other sensual information is received, this needs to be interpreted and expressed verbally, which takes more time.

Part of these challenges are common when engaging with intuitive or embodied information and can be addressed using a variety of strategies (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999; see also Guttorm et al., in print). In the case of IIC, the source material cannot be recorded directly to be retranslated by a second translator, as for example audible aspects of communications could. However, one can work with multiple animal communicators simultaneously, and triangulate the results. In this case, it has to be taken into account that translations from a non-linguistic to a linguistic information stream by multiple interpreters may imply increased variances: When different people describe the same sensation, emotion, sound or image, this leads to a wider variety of descriptions than when they translate the same sentence. The overlap and differences in translations by multiple animal communicators in the pilot are in line with my wider results from the courses the animal communicators offer, which also include written exercises and written certification exams. In these, the consistency of the answers written down by multiple animal communicators as they interpret responses to the same questions to the same animal individuals has been considerable. Other useful strategies that some animal communicators employ themselves, include observing if there are any shifts with regard to the issues discussed (i.e. behavior changes) or returning to the animal to check if they agree with their interpretations. The challenges may be further addressed by employing phenomenological approaches to language (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2012 [1945]; Wijngaarden, under review) and specific triangulations of methods and dissemination techniques that move beyond a singular focus on text.

Distinct and consistent voices

Despite the challenges outlined, in most communication instances, answers produced were clear, distinct and consistent, and the animal communicators were able to explicitly separate their own and others' opinions, thoughts and feelings from what was expressed by the animal interviewees. This is illustrated by the fact that throughout the interviews, the animal communicators often reflected how their own views and experiences did not align with the translation they were giving on behalf of the animal. For example, while the animal communicators regularly tended to advocate for centering animals or nature as a whole (even if from a anthropocentric perspective), the animals themselves often expressed more radically holistic views. For example, one of the lions, reacting to the conversation at the end of the interview expressed (translated by Wendy):

> Don't forget the oneness of everything…. That includes everything and everyone, you know, the fences and the cars and the buildings and the trees and the nature and the sense of this is one big whole wonderful beautiful world and we are all part of it, so don't forget that…. Don't focus just on the nature or just on the people. Think about everything together, always, always.

When asked if he wishes to be considered or treated as a person, the lion expressed that: 'We are already considered that, … there is no other possibility'. This puzzles Wendy, who adds 'which doesn't make sense to me because I know there's so many people in this world that doesn't think like that' [sic]. The lion's response invites reflections on the anthropocentric

assumptions underlying both the interpreter's reaction as well as my question, effectively undermining the authority of the researcher by questioning the question.

Throughout the animal communication sessions as well as the interviews I recorded many occasions where the animal communicators reacted with considerable surprise or had to laugh as a result of the responses provided by the animal interviewees. These underline the independence of the translations from the interpreters' own views. For example, in response to a question on how she sees the relationship between humans and nature, the cat describes how she observes humans often walk almost blindly, being in their head without an awareness of what happens right around them. She subsequently advices to 'loose the self-importance'. Sita, who translated the instance, reflects that she herself 'never thought of it quite like that before, but that is what she [the cat] said'. In a subsequent interview, Wendy admits that although she has several decennia of professional experience as an animal communicator, before these trials, she had not expected that questions with such abstract philosophical foci could be answered by animals in this fashion. Both the animal communicators and I walk away from the interviews feeling that we engaged with novel points of view, stimulating incentives to further question our conceptualizations and approaches.

Conclusion

As the number of animal communicators is growing worldwide, and more-than-human insights and theories are developing, IIC can no longer be approached as exclusively symbolic or Indigenous. In this study, I executed interviews with animals by collaborating with animal communicators who use IIC to empathically access and interpret animals' perspectives and voices. The interviews were executed with felines using multiple animal communicators as translators. This produced clear, distinct and consistent responses that challenged and confronted animal communicators as well as researcher to reflect on their perspectives, expectations and taken for granted assumptions. Overall, these results suggest that IIC can be useful for developing novel multispecies insights and develop more relational and multivocal multispecies methods.

Challenges included clearly distinguishing and filtering the animals' voices and bridging ontological divides and modes of communication. Some of these challenges are similar to those encountered in translating across human lingo-cultural and non-lingual to lingual divides, while others are amplified due to the intuitive and embodied, multisensory nature of the information involved, and need more research to address them. I propose a continuation of consultations with animal communicators and animals, as well as increased cooperation with Indigenous scholars to develop the conceptual and methodological approaches, protocols and dissemination procedures to productively employ IIC in academic research. Moreover, there is a need to work with a higher number and variety of animals. Just like humans from different cultural backgrounds, ages, capacities and characters are interested in and productively engage with different kinds of questions or assignments, this may be true for different individuals and species of animals, who have contrasting personalities and life worlds, including divergent sensual, rational and emotional experiences.

Engaging animals as research participants through IIC can produce further insights and strategies to bridge the gap between 'self' and 'other', as it simultaneously unsettles hierarchical divides between humans and other animals, as well as between different ways of knowing. Exploring its potential for academic methods can produce novel dialogical approaches that develop concrete intersections between dominant, Indigenous and other

alternative knowledge systems (including the non-human), bringing the largely theoretical explorations of the ontological and species turns into academic research *practice*.

As ontology, epistemology and methodology necessarily build on each other, the ongoing turns are not only changing our views on reality, but also on how we can know this reality, and the methodological possibilities through which this knowledge is gained (Linghede, 2019). In turn, 'methods not only describe but "enact" the world they purport to study' (Taylor & Hamilton, 2014, p. 255). They have ontological consequences, as they can be mechanisms to maintain or break down ontological and epistemological divisions (Buller, 2015) and influence how we analyse, represent, understand and experience the world. Practically engaging with new methods is thus a powerful part of this cycle.

IIC generates a space in which researchers and (non-)human participants can co-create novel methodological strategies in multispecies research, and take in new ground in the ongoing academic processes to open up research paradigms. The practice as well as the results of interviewing animals with the help of animal communicators challenged us to attend to how we are enquiring when dealing with other species. This is as important as listening to the responses we elicit, because if we ask different questions or ask questions differently, we may elicit different responses and allow new voices to be heard (Despret, 2016). The methodological adventure described here, progressively questioned and disrupted assumptions underlying dominant ontologies, Cartesian approaches and species hierarchies, questioning how they influence academic thinking. It thus furthers the revolutionary potential of post-human research to stimulate a more radically multivocal academia, in which diverging knowledges from a variety of agents and localities are in an increasingly symmetrical conversation (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2021), contributing to the decolonization of methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) and development of cognitive and interspecies justice (Barrett et al., 2021; Healey & Pepper, 2020; Hoppers, 2001; Santos, 2018; Visvanathan, 2011) by practically and collaboratively engaging with human and non-human forms of knowing.

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