Regarding Rocky: A Theoretical and Ethnographic Exploration of Interspecies Intersubjectivity

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Abstract
Both theoretical and empirical work in a variety of disciplines has resulted in a recent turn away from Cartesian and Meadian anthropocentrism in the direction of a radical reconsideration of nonhuman animal mind and agency. Central to sociology’s role in envisioning a repopulated social world is the analysis of nonhuman-human social interaction. Because all social action is predicated on certain assumptions regarding the minds of others, a theory of intersubjectivity must be at the core of any such project. It is argued here that the key elements employed in Alfred Schutz’s conceptualization of intersubjectivity among humans are also demonstrated in the routine communicative projects of humans and their companion animals. After presenting a Schutzian theory of intersubjectivity, this article analyzes, from an ethnographic perspective, elements of the everyday lifeworld Rocky—a deaf, paraplegic cat—cohabits with the author and other family members. Through that analysis, the paper demonstrates that the dynamics of everyday interactions through which Rocky actively participates in the creation of meaning and the achievement of understanding is highly consistent with Schutz’s theory of human intersubjectivity.

Keywords
Alfred Schutz, cats, interspecies, intersubjectivity

In this paper I present an abbreviated autoethnographic account (Hayano, 1979) of the transformation of my companion and friend Rocky from one kind of cat to another in order to introduce him and situate the interactants (Carol, Libby, and I) who, with him, cohabit the everyday lifeworld of our household. Later I will describe and analyze other parts of Rocky’s story in order to elucidate the ways in which I believe we jointly create meaning and achieve a significant measure of genuine intersubjectivity. In doing so, I am guided by the work of Alfred Schutz and Edmund Husserl. The basic question I address is: to what extent can Schutz’s conceptualization of human intersubjectivity be applied to understanding the process through which we accomplish intersubjectivity with members of other species? After delineating Schutz’s theory of mundane intersubjectivity, I describe how...
Rocky’s communicative acts comport with those that, until recently, have been portrayed as uniquely human accomplishments.

My method is very much in the ethnographic tradition of Cooley’s (1922) classic insider observations of his own children and Piaget’s (1929) involved observations of his children as well as his students. To a significant extent, both the analytical and theoretical goals of this work align it with the five key features of what Anderson has recently called “analytic autoethnography”: “(1) complete member researcher status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis” (2006, p. 378). However, the work is also colored by cognitive and affective elements that resonate with what Ellis (1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) has called “evocative autoethnography.” In that sense, I attend not only to certain of my own actions but also to the workings of my thoughts and feelings as I have observed and interacted intimately with Rocky for the past 12 years.

Rocky’s Story

He came to us one spring day by strolling casually and unapologetically into Carol’s classroom, leaping effortlessly onto a long table shared by several students and seeming not to notice or care that he had suddenly and pertinently become the central focus of a class on social deviance. Without a hint of trepidation, and with characteristic nonchalance, he used his right paw to topple a large, icy Mountain Dew and proceeded to sample its leaking contents. Both students and professor reacted to this flamboyant breach of decorum with amusement and admiration, something that would seem surprising only to those who have never met Rocky. After class and a brief conversation of gestures with Carol, he decided to adopt us. Our vet estimated he was between six months and a year at that time. In the following months he established himself as a full-fledged member of the family, neighborhood chat du monde, and godfather to the local feral cat colony. Some would say he had landed in clover, but to us, we were the privileged.

The defining moment in my relationship with Rocky—the one that forged a special, even spiritual, bond between us—occurred about a year later. It happened the moment I felt his warm, wet urine permeate the legs of my jeans as we stared into each other’s eyes, sharing a feeling of sheer terror. His was a look I had never seen, and one most people never see in the piercing, normally unflinching, eyes of a cat. To me it was a look of fear and confusion, perhaps tinged with the embarrassment that comes with the loss of self-defining
dignity. As Carol sped through the streets linking our house to the closest veterinary clinic—18 hours after he had gone missing and only moments after she had rescued him, brutalized and petrified, from a nearby drainage ditch—Rocky and I sat suspended, locked onto each other’s gaze, both searching for something vital—he, I thought, for reassurance and I, for signs of heroic revival or impending demise. Moments later, with his life in the balance, we were informed that the vet had left for the day, and we would have to take him to the 24-hour emergency hospital across town. A few stressful hours later we were presented with a gloomy prognosis and faced a decision familiar to humans who have for small portions of their own lives cohabited the full span of a companion animal’s existence.

After several days of intensive care and Rocky’s survival an apparent certainty, we began to explore rehabilitation alternatives and a more definitive diagnosis. Eventually, we were informed by experts at a veterinary school that he had suffered an embolism in his hindquarters, which had left him permanently paralyzed in both hind legs. Although spared the loss of his internal bodily functions or the use of his tail, he would never again leap, dart, and climb as only felines can. After having him fitted for the type of two-wheel cart one occasionally sees strapped to dogs, we decided the device would only restrict his ability to use his claws and increasingly strong forelegs to climb—in the style of an acrobat ascending a rope—onto the chairs, sofas, and beds on which he could observe, lounge, and sleep without fear of assault from above or behind. During his long and difficult recovery, my feelings about Rocky vacillated among concern, fear, sadness, pride, and sorrow. I often felt sorry for him, and I wondered whether he felt sorry for himself, as most humans would. He didn’t seem to, but how was I to know?

Eventually, the disappointment and sadness that emerged from Rocky’s traumatic experience receded, and the abnormal became normal. We enjoyed the hilarious sight of him fishtailing around the corners of the house as his front legs propelled him at a remarkable pace toward the sounds he associated with the serving of breakfast, dinner, or treats, and we marveled at his ability to jump down from a kitchen countertop or the back of the couch, landing on his front feet and lowering his hindquarter to the ground with the slow and controlled power of a hydraulic lift lowering an elevated car onto a garage floor. Within a relatively short time, he had progressed to the point of being able to move from place to place in the house with little or no assistance and indulge his demanding hunting drive, albeit limited to the smaller and less challenging Anthropoda insecta.

We were amazed by the seeming internal calm he evidenced after the first few days following his embolism, which endured throughout his transition
from a physically formidable predator to a confused and somewhat helpless kitty struggling for survival and ultimately to a physically distorted yet functionally impressive version of his original self. Perhaps it was simply the product of millions of years of evolution that drives many species to mask their injuries and limitations, but to our human eyes it looked like the essence of courage and dignity. How much was our nurturance, love, and admiration, and how much of it emerged from something deep within him is impossible to know, but in no more than a year Rocky was back—different but not less. If only the story could end here.

Some eight years later, at the approximate age of 10, he was showing signs of an ear problem. A kindly vet whose office was near where we lived, and where Rocky had visited once or twice, agreed to come by the house on his way home one afternoon to examine him. The vet sedated him, examined his ears, and decided to deep-clean them with an antibacterial solution. We later realized, and a feline neurologist subsequently verified, that Rocky had been deafened as the result of an overly aggressive cleaning.

After his first trauma, Rocky underwent a forced yet largely self-directed transformation of body; after the second he began to display a pronounced transformation of mind as well. This was manifested most obviously in the development of a richer repertoire of bodily communications as well as vocalizations to communicate his desires, needs, and moods. For example, immediately after he lost his hearing, we noticed that he had begun to meow quite loudly, although not all the time and not just to express irritation, which he had always done. Initially, we attributed this to the fact that he could no longer hear himself and thus modulate his voice. Shortly, however, we realized that he meowed that way only in certain situations, such as when we failed to see him and almost stepped on him or when he was at risk of falling victim to the wild and exuberant jumping of our German Pointer, Libby. We might have simply attributed that to a state of irritation, had we not also noticed that he began to meow significantly louder as he moved from a room where he had been alone to one that was inhabited by Libby or humans. We now believe the motive to be the same in both situations: to alert to his presence whoever might be around the next corner by signaling, “Cat here; watch your step.”

The speed and agility he had in his early life and his ability to hear exactly where we were prior to his loss of hearing had made such announcements unnecessary, but upon realizing that he lacked both of those abilities, he innovated by sending out vocal announcements of his proximity.

Thus, by virtue of his ability to adapt, both behaviorally and cognitively, Rocky again transcended his physical limitations. For a third time, he learned to become a viable participant in the social world of our household and, as a
result, became an even more beloved member of the family. As I write this, he is taking a long and deep Sunday afternoon nap nestled into his favorite chair in our living room.

A Reconsideration of Nonhuman Animals

Many who share their homes with cats (or dogs) will be neither surprised nor overly impressed by Rocky’s story. Indeed, what makes it impressive—although Carol and I might wish to think otherwise—is that Rocky is probably no more amazing than most others of his species. Indeed, recent work in a variety of disciplines demands a reconsideration of the place of nonhuman animals in both the social and moral worlds of humans. However, the now common belief that such beings have the right to be considered within the moral universe of humans and treated as viable members of human social groups is relatively new and still far from universal.

That the treatment of nonhuman animals should be considered a moral issue was clearly articulated over 200 years ago when Bentham (1789/1949) argued that the question of how animals should be considered is not, as Descartes (1637/1998) had suggested, whether or not they could reason or articulate their thoughts through language, but whether they could suffer. Nearly two centuries later, Singer (1990) asserted the same criterion in a more radical call for the liberation of animals from human oppression. Of course, humans have a great deal of difficulty finding common ground on just what our moral responsibilities are to members of other species. Attitudes and ideologies fall along a complex continuum ranging from various forms of dominionism (Smith, 2009) to welfarism (Grandin, 2009) to, ultimately, liberation (Best & Nocella, 2004) and the abolition of all forms of animal use (Regan, 2008). Still others consider nonhuman animals in ways that combine elements of more than one ideological position. Hearne, for example, argues that animals have rights but suggests that the fundamental right of all animals is “to be believed in, a philosophical right to freedom of speech”; that is, the right to say things they have not been taught (1987, p. 266). Beyond that, as with humans, she believes they have the right to earn rights, which companion animals can accomplish most completely through mutually respectful interactions with humans, even interactions that involve obedience training.

In recent years, the issue of the moral rights of animals—however that may be conceived—has been a concern of scholars from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy (Derrida, 2008; Singer, 1990), literature (Wolfe, 2003; Hearne, 1987) and anthropology (Thomas, 1993). The movement beyond
earlier, invidious anthropocentric conceptualizations of nonhuman animals has also inspired empirical research by social and behavioral scientists—such as Shapiro’s (2008) insightful application of a phenomenological psychology to understanding other animals through kinesthetic empathy, Sanders’ (2008) sociologically inspired ethnographic approach to understanding how human caretakers attribute mindedness to nonhuman animals, and Brandt’s ethnographic account of the codevelopment of “embodied non-verbal language” by humans and horses (2009, p. 319). Other important work by sociologists has focused on such related issues as symbolic interaction between humans and felines (Alger & Alger, 1997) and animal selfhood (Irvine, 2009). As Myers (2003) demonstrates, these latter works represent a correction to a long-standing reluctance among sociologists to question anthropocentric assumptions about our relationship to members of other species, which Arluke and Sanders (1996) correctly trace to Mead’s (1934) insistence on the necessity of language to the existence of mind. Influenced by this rapidly growing body of evidence, serious consideration of animal mind—and, implicitly, rights—has begun to spread beyond academic discourse into the popular media (Kluger, 2010).

Taken together, these authors present a compelling and more complex view of animal mind than was previously held. This view strongly suggests, and some of its proponents have explicitly argued for, the ability of humans and other animals to construct jointly a significant degree of interpersonal understanding (cf. Irvine, 2004). Here I hope to build upon those projects by (1) explicating the specific criteria for positing the existence of interspecies intersubjectivity, (2) exploring the extent to which it might be accomplished, and (3) providing ethnographic examples of the specific ways in which it is accomplished.

The Problem of Intersubjectivity

The understanding of interspecies intersubjectivity presented here is rooted in an account of Carol’s and my communicative relationship with Rocky and is organized around a particular theoretical orientation to the problem of intersubjectivity. Whether intra or interspecies, relationships are built and maintained on the basis of shared meaning, which emerges from and reflexively makes communication possible. Any attempt to communicate with another is based on the assumptions that the other has a mind and that that mind is knowable—at least in the sense of understanding certain of its relevant intentions, motives, and goals. Thus, all social interaction assumes the possibility of intersubjectivity—by which I mean shared intentionality or consciousness of
Reich defines intersubjectivity as “a situation in which two or more persons share knowledge reflexively, that is, all know X and know that all others know this too” (2010, p. 41). Moreover, inasmuch as intersubjectivity is constituted as shared consciousness, it is best viewed as an interpersonal accomplishment in the sense that A’s subjective understanding of B’s actions correspond to the intentions of B and vice versa. Such understanding does not rest on solitary acts of empathy, whereby one interactant directly apprehends what the other is experiencing. What it does require, however, is that one or both interactants consciously strives to be understood and to understand the other.

The accomplishment of intersubjectivity begins with the assumption of its possibility, and that assumption gives meaning and focus to interaction. However, meaningful interaction does not require fully accurate knowledge of the other mind, only the assumption of it. Indeed, the very idea of a misunderstanding—as opposed to a nonunderstanding—is rooted in the operative assumption of intersubjectivity (Young, 1999). Thus, our repeated attempts to communicate with other species and their attempts to do likewise are clear evidence of a shared belief in the possibility of interspecies intersubjectivity.

The most exhaustive sociological explication of the nature of intersubjectivity is that of Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970, 1971), whose work had a significant impact on the development of the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological traditions within sociology. Schutz’s analysis was inspired primarily by Edmund Husserl’s work on the phenomenology of mind (1970) and, less directly, by the writings of Husserl’s mentor, Henri Bergson (Larabee, 1949). Thus, I begin with a brief description of relevant elements of Schutz’s extension of Husserl’s (1960) philosophical investigation of intersubjectivity. Although Husserl grappled with intersubjectivity both as a transcendental and a mundane problem, Schutz’s somewhat controversial conclusion (cf. Carrington, 1979) that Husserl’s transcendental investigation was inevitably a failed project (Schutz, 1970) led him to focus on intersubjective understanding as a mundane accomplishment of everyday life. Regarding it as “the fundamental ontological category of human existence in the world” (1970, p. 82), Schutz was concerned primarily with the accomplishment of intersubjectivity through the actions—both cognitive and behavioral—of interacting individuals going about their everyday lives.

Schutz’s conceptualization of intersubjectivity rests on an elaboration of Husserl’s notion of the “natural attitude” through which the world is experienced as “pregiven”—as “that which exists” (Husserl, 1970, p. 145). Schutz suggests that, within the natural attitude of everyday life, the world as it appears before us is taken for granted, at least until proven otherwise. Thus, we
do not question our perceptions; instead we base our actions upon them, trusting them as long as they serve us adequately in the conduct of whatever business is at hand. An essential assumption of the natural attitude is that “the world of daily life into which we are born is from the outset an intersubjective world. This implies on the one hand that this world is not my private one but common to all of us; on the other hand that within this world there exist fellow-men with whom I am connected by manifold social relationships” (1971, p. 218). All interpretation of this shared world, Schutz contends, is based upon previous experiences of it—both our own and those of others who socialize us into a common stock of knowledge. The lifeworld (lebenswelt), which we experience as given, self-evident, and mutually experienced, is in its essence a “cultural world… of signification” (Schutz, 1971, p. 126).

Another key element of the natural attitude is the assumption of “the reciprocity of perspectives” through which we are able to overcome the problem of idiosyncratic perception of mutually shared objects and events (Schutz, 1971, p. 11). This is accomplished first through the assumption of the “interchangeability of standpoints,” whereby we assume that if we were to change places we would each be able to see things essentially as seen by the other. Second, through the idealization of the “congruency of the system of relevances,” we assume—and assume that the other does likewise—that (1) such differences of perspective typically “can be disregarded for the purpose at hand,” and (2) we “interpret the actually or potentially common objects, facts, and events in an ‘empirically identical’ manner, i.e., sufficient for all practical purposes” (Schutz, 1971, p. 316). Certainly, there are elements of our common perceptual experience that are within the “manipulatory sphere” of one but not both of us. “But it is a corollary of the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints that the world within actual reach of another is also within my attainable (potential) reach and vice versa” (1971, p. 317). Thus, the idealization of the reciprocity of perspectives suggests that intersubjectivity is possible, within the context of face-to-face interaction, because both interactants perceive the world through the same mechanisms and are capable of mentally putting themselves in the place of the other in order to see the world as she does. Finally, although we realize that understanding of the other’s inner experience can never be perfect, our own personal experiences show us that it is, under most conditions, sufficient for the conduct of everyday social life.

But exactly how, within the context of the natural attitude, is intersubjectivity achieved? After a thoroughgoing analysis of Husserl’s (1960) struggle to understand intersubjectivity in terms of a transcendental ego, Schutz concludes that “intersubjectivity is not a problem of constitution which can be solved within the transcendental sphere, but is rather a datum (Gegebenheit) of
the real world” (1970, p. 82). Like Husserl, he rejects the notion that, through a form of direct empathy, we can know the mind of the other. Instead, our “knowledge of another’s mind is possible only through the intermediary events occurring on or produced by another’s body” (Schutz, 1971, p. 314). Further, “it can be said that my own stream of consciousness is given to me continuously and in all its fullness but that yours is given to me in discontinuous segments, never in its fullness, and only in ‘interpretive perspectives’” (Schutz, 1967, p. 107). By relying, of necessity, on interpretive perspectives and discontinuous segments from the ongoing and continuous activity of others, we interpret their actions. Such interpretations serve as the foundation for acts of attribution (Heider, 1958) through which we judge others’ intentions. Because interpretations and attributions will always be based on incomplete information and subjective perceptions, the “co-observation of indexical events” is insufficient for us truly to know each other’s experience and thus each other’s intentions (Reich, 2010, p. 47).

As a consequence of understanding’s reliance on the intermediary actions produced, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the body, getting closer to understanding the other’s intentions requires that we distinguish between two conceptions expressed by the term motive. First, to grasp the intention behind an action, we must grasp what Schutz refers to as the “in-order-to” motive, which is the end toward which the other’s action has been directed. This is quite different from the “because” motive, which is that part of the lifeworld of the other—of which we may or may not have knowledge—that moves the other to act in a certain way. That is, because of who I am, as a result of the totality of my experience of my own lifeworld at any given moment, I act in-order-to produce a certain outcome. For example, because I did not have time to eat lunch I walk into the kitchen and begin to look for food in order to satisfy my hunger. However, since “because” motives are located somewhere in the temporal flow of the actor’s inner experience—“the inner durée with its continuous succession and the interconnected stream of consciousness” (Schutz, 1970, p. 85)—they can never be known for certain by the observer and are often equally opaque to the actor. Indeed, the “genuine because motive” is accessible to the observer only through a process of reconstruction, based on observation of the completed act, through which the observer employs the reciprocity of perspectives in order to make sense of the actor’s underlying motive.

In the world of everyday social interaction, the immediate problem is most often one of discovering the relevant in-order-to motive, or the projected end state it reflects. As part of the natural attitude of the observer, he presumes the actor’s in-order-to motive to be rooted in the immediate situation and thus
uses his knowledge of the situation and perception of the actor’s definition of it as indicators of her immediate intentions. However, this task is not always easy because the realization of an end state—what Schutz calls a “completed act”—typically involves the execution of multiple intermediate “actions” (Schutz, 1971, pp. 19-20). For example, the act of teasing another might involve the separate and seemingly incompatible actions of saying something ostensibly insulting while using a certain tone of voice and smiling. To interpret correctly the actor’s in-order-to motive, the observer must know which actions in the ongoing stream constitute the completed act. Thus, to know whether an ostensibly insulting remark made by an acquaintance who then smiles should be interpreted as an insult or a joke depends on whether we assume the smile to be part of the completed act of joking, or a separate act of hedging an actual insult.

Among humans, all of this is made significantly simpler as a result of a set of shared symbols, in the form of language. Through communicative acts constructed in discourse, interactants can come closer to achieving intersubjectivity (cf. Habermas, 1984). However, inasmuch as language meaning is inherently indexical, speech acts are inherently ambiguous (Mehan & Wood, 1975). Thus, shared, contextualized knowledge is a vital tool in the construction of intersubjective discourse. But, the same linguistic devices used to construct intersubjective discourse can also be strategically effective in distorting or obfuscating communicative actions, thereby creating a discourse of misunderstanding (Young, 1995). Thus, because sincerity among communicative partners cannot always be assumed, a shared language must be acknowledged as a potential impediment as well as an asset in achieving true intersubjectivity.

In the course of developing the theoretical underpinnings of a phenomenological sociology, Schutz presents—dispersed throughout the corpus of his work—all the essential components of a theory of intersubjectivity. By organizing the key elements of his far-reaching discourse on the subject, I have attempted to present the essential outlines of such a theory, which I shall now summarize. As a starting point, I would suggest that, because understanding the other is essential for successful social interaction, interactants are motivated to do so. Such understanding involves, among other things, some knowledge of the unarticulated in-order-to motives of the other. That understanding is aided by a shared natural attitude of everyday life, which is composed of a set of background assumptions about the lifeworld, including the conviction that the lifeworld we experience is (1) real, (2) as it appears, and (3) mutually shared with others, at least those within our cultural community. We also assume that we all perceive the world through the same mechanisms
and are capable of taking each other's point of view on matters at hand. Finally, we assume that although understanding of each other's inner experiences can never be perfect, it is typically sufficient until proven otherwise. Armed with these tools of the natural attitude, we assume that with some effort we are capable of understanding others and that they are capable of understanding us. However, because we cannot literally read each other's thoughts, intersubjectivity cannot be accomplished through direct acts of empathy. Thus, we must rely on our ability to interpret accurately the perceptible actions of others. Unfortunately, such interpretations and attributions are necessarily based on incomplete information and subjective perceptions (Neisser, 1976). Moreover, because the ultimate causes of others' actions are rooted in the full duration of their inner experiences, intersubjective understanding typically is focused on discovering the more immediate in-order-to motive, or the projected end state it reflects. During interaction, the observer presumes the actor's in-order-to motive to be rooted in the immediate situation and thus uses his knowledge of the situation and perception of the actor's view of it, “role-taking” (Mead, 1934, p. 254), as indicators of her immediate intentions. To interpret correctly the actor's in-order-to motive, however, the observer must also know which actions in the ongoing stream constitute the actor's completed act. Such interpretations are based upon (1) the corpus of knowledge interactants share, (2) the observer’s own definition of the situation, and (3) knowledge of the other.

Interspecies Intersubjectivity

Before attempting to illuminate the problem of interspecies intersubjectivity by applying the key elements of Schutz's theory, I will briefly discuss the basic presuppositions on which a sense of intersubjectivity rests. First is the assumption that the other is a minded actor. As discussed above, throughout most of the history of philosophy and the social sciences, the notion of the intersubjective other has been restricted to other humans. Within sociology, Mead (1934) conceived of mind in terms of an internal conversation of gestures and the ability to create shared meaning through social interaction. Both of those requirements rest on the ability to manipulate significant cultural symbols, most notably those that constitute a shared language. Because of his emphasis on spoken language, Mead explicitly excluded nonhuman animals from the category of minded actors. However, Myers argues that language is not only unnecessary for meaningful interaction, it is “not sufficient even to explain intra-human interaction” (2003, p. 53). Mead was correct in asserting that a
shared system of linguistic symbols can facilitate the efforts of interactants to reveal their minds to each other, thus facilitating the accomplishment of intersubjectivity. However, as Birdwhistell (1970) and numerous others have suggested, a large amount of personal information is transmitted among interactants via paralinguistic and nonverbal gestures. Indeed, a significant quantity and quality of information is communicated between humans and other animals via the body (e.g., Brandt, 2009; Shapiro, 2008). Thus, I agree with Sanders (1999) and Irvine (2004) that Mead’s view of mind is unnecessarily phonocentric.

Although Schutz does not present his own definitional theory of mind, he clearly sees it as existing in a constant state of becoming within the stream of consciousness and being unique in “its specific way of judging, of evaluating, of being motivated in its positing and attitudes” (1970, p. 35). He further describes it as “the sedimentation of its habitualities” and “thus its individual history” (1970, p. 35). That is, mind is manifested in our habits of judging, evaluating, and formulating action projects. Rocky, I would argue, manifests his mind through these same habits, and as with humans, such manifestations take the form of action projects consciously chosen on the basis of conclusions drawn from cognitive evaluations. Rocky undertook one such project under the watchful eyes of several witnesses in our living room one Friday evening. As we all sat around talking, Rocky climbed from his spot on the lap of one of our guests to the top of the back of the couch. After sitting there looking at his climbing perch, which was situated between the back of the couch and one of the front living room windows, he moved to the place on the couch closest to the perch (approximately 18 inches away) and positioned himself as if he were about to attempt a jump onto his perch. Inasmuch as he has no mobility in his hind legs and none of us had ever seen him jump horizontally using only his forelegs, this drew the attention of everyone in the room. As we watched, he began to rock back and forth as if visualizing and assessing his likelihood of successfully completing the jump. After several minutes of study, he moved into just the right position, rocked back and forth several times, leaned back a bit, propelled himself forward into the empty space, and successfully landed on his perch, much to the amazement of all witnesses. This novel move was clearly the result of a methodically conjured plan that involved a careful and deliberate evaluation of the situation, a mental assessment of his physical ability, and a final judgment about his likelihood of success. Moreover, after Rocky’s great leap forward, there was speculation among the spectators about whether or not he had ever made such a move before, in private, and I wondered whether he might have decided to do it at that moment precisely because of the presence of an audience. Given his recognized flair for the dramatic, no
one seemed to doubt that a bit of showmanship was involved. I suggest that, whatever his motivations might have been, this was a clear example of minded action. Able-bodied cats simply do not use their front legs for jumping, only for landing. Thus, it is quite unlikely that there is any genetic predisposition for such a move. Although it took Rocky several years after his injury to attempt it, since that inaugural jump he has repeated it several times.

Of course, one could argue that the preceding example illustrates Rocky’s brain in action, but evidence of the existence of mind, as Mead saw it, is the ability to create shared meaning through social interaction. A recent interaction between Rocky and me provides such evidence. After Rocky’s vet informed us of the need to capture a urine sample in order to complete a follow-up on some blood work, we replaced his normal cat litter with less than half a cup of aquarium gravel, per instruction. A few hours later, Rocky discovered the substitution and immediately summoned me to the scene with a couple of very loud meows. I complied and discovered him sitting in front of his litter igloo. He looked at me, looked at the igloo, looked back at me, and meowed again with a slight turn of his head. I responded by opening the top of the igloo to show him that I was aware of the situation, closed it again to show him that I had no intention of adding litter, and left the room. A few minutes later I heard him scratching at the paltry pile of gravel, having finally relieved himself, and then saw him run across the hall and onto the kitchen rug, which he proceeded to scratch and claw vigorously—a clear and frequently used signal of irritation. We both knew exactly what had transpired.

Assuming the mindedness of all interactants, the socio-cultural context in which intersubjectivity is constructed is the natural attitude. To what extent, and on what grounds, can we assume that the natural attitude of the cat is compatible with ours? Repeated acts of attempted communication would seem to provide prima facie evidence for the assumption that “the world is not my private one but common” to me and my “fellow-men with whom I am connected by manifold social relationships” (Schutz, 1971, p. 218). In addition to me, those who share Rocky’s everyday world include Carol, Libby, and a number of friends—both human and nonhuman—who visit our house. Like the rest of us, Rocky recognizes those others from past encounters and acts toward them in ways that are consistent from one encounter to the other as well as being appropriate to the unique relationships he has with them as individuals. For example, typically he keeps his distance from our friends who have shown that they do not particularly enjoy petting cats and climbs into the laps of those who clearly do. Although I know of no systematic evidence for such a tendency, many cats are known for intentionally invading the space of those who care the least for their kind. I can only attribute Rocky’s greater
discretion to his more vulnerable physical state and a generally cautious approach to larger animals, even those who might only unintentionally injure him. Similarly, when Rocky walks into the study, stands by his water bowl, and meows until I get up to fill it with fresh water, from which he then proceeds to drink quietly, he indicates that he assumes his water bowl to be part of the world we share, even though he has never seen me drink from it. Moreover, to my knowledge, he has never meowed at Libby on the assumption that she would fill his water bowl, even though she does occasionally drink from it.

It is also clear that Rocky recognizes that he, Carol, Libby, and I share a common stock of knowledge. For example, just because Carol or I have awoken, let Rocky and Libby out of the study where they sleep, and deposited him at the foot of our bed, that does not mean that we humans do not intend to go back to sleep. Thus, he settles quietly at the foot of our bed and waits until either he gets bored and jumps down to do something else, or we begin to stir and talk—which he recognizes, even though he cannot hear us—whereupon he purrs loudly and climbs onto one of us for a morning petting. It is important to note that his display of patience and consideration appeared rather spontaneously; there was no training involved. Rocky’s willingness to allow us a little extra sleep, coupled with his apparent understanding that we would reward his patience indicates that his stock of knowledge regarding everyday life in our household is quite compatible with ours.

A somewhat more reflexively demanding requirement for accomplishing intersubjectivity is the ability to employ the assumption of the reciprocity of perspectives. To what extent can it be said that certain nonhuman animals, such as cats, have the ability to assume such a view vis-à-vis members of other species? This capacity is often evidenced by the fact that interactants act and interpret the actions of their cointeractants according to shared cultural rules, especially the emergent and unspoken norms of what Fine calls “private culture” (1970, p. 267). Thus, for example, when one interactant claims an advantageous position vis-à-vis the other by virtue of such a norm (e.g., first-come, first-served), it is assumed that the other will concede one’s right to that advantage by realizing that, if their positions were switched, the other could assume the same advantage. A clear incidence of such an assumption is the mutual acknowledgment of the squatter’s rights norm that emerged between Rocky and Libby. Because Libby is much larger than Rocky, we purchase beds for them that are appropriate for their respective sizes. However, often they seem to enjoy the comfort of each other’s beds. Thus, although it is not exactly clear how it came about, they both routinely acknowledge the right of the other to rest or sleep in whatever bed he or she first claims. On occasion, when
Libby gets up from a rest in order to get a drink of water or look out the window, Rocky will seize the opportunity to take temporary possession of her bed. In doing so, he demonstrates that he assumes—and this is vital, given the size and mobility advantage she has over him—that she understands and will honor the rule, just as he does when she decides to curl up on one of his beds. As this example shows, Rocky certainly seems to have the ability to put himself mentally in Libby’s place in order to anticipate her response.

Because we do not share a language, Rocky cannot confirm directly that he actually imagines situations from our perspective in order to see things as we do. All that can be said on this point is that he acts as though he does. For example, he clearly recognizes certain activities on our part as indicating that we are preparing to leave the house, and that recognition is not limited to repetitive patterns, such as the morning routine. His response to this recognition is to make sure we do not leave without putting out fresh food for him, even if it is not his normal feeding time. He does this by looking at us, meowing loudly until he gets our attention, and dramatically turning and heading toward the kitchen. If we follow, he leads us to his food and meows until we take care of business. If we do not follow, he will look back at us and meow insistently until we acknowledge him and follow his lead. Presumably, he does not observe us and take our perspective by thinking, “If I were cleaning up, putting on different clothes, and gathering up certain items that I only use when I leave the house, I would be getting ready to leave.” More likely, he recognizes a pattern in our behavior consistent with our leaving the house and realizes that we might not be back before he gets hungry. However, what is significant is what he does when he realizes that, for it is then that his behavior indicates that he takes the additional cognitive step of imagining that we might forget to put his food where he can get to it and takes the necessary steps to ensure that that does not happen.

True intersubjectivity requires not only some amount of role-taking, but also the ability to distinguish between different in-order-to motives—via the intermediate actions that serve as signs of them—and concomitantly between those actions and the completed acts toward which they are directed. It seems to me that Rocky displays this ability in the process of waiting for Carol and me to reach a certain point in our predeparture routine before gesturing his desire that we check his food before we leave. There are several intermediate actions in our routine that we must finish in-order-to accomplish the completed act of departing. The first move often involves one of us informing the other that “we need to start getting ready to go.” Because Rocky cannot hear, he typically takes no notice of such utterances. However, he does notice as we begin moving from whatever activities we were previously involved in,
and immediately begins to monitor our behavior closely. As he notices us move toward the bathroom area, he positions himself in order to observe our actions more closely. He observes as we progress from showering and otherwise attending to our personal grooming to dressing and gathering up what we intend to take with us, and at some point in that process he moves closer to one or both of us. Then, either just before or shortly after we begin to collect whatever items we might intend to take (purse, bag, coats, etc.), he meows loudly and makes his dramatic move. The timing of his behavior suggests that he distinguishes among those actions that manifest our in-order-to motives as well as distinguishing each of them from the completed act of leaving. In moving from the bed to a different place of observation, he always seems to position himself between us and the kitchen, yet he waits silently until all the necessary intermediate acts are completed before signaling that we need to feed him. Moreover, it is in large part because of the consistent timing of his grand gesture that we immediately understand its intended meaning. It is also important to note that, on those occasions when we leave separately, Rocky waits until the second person is ready to leave before making his feed-me gesture, which is further evidence that he is not simply responding to a familiar stimulus but distinguishes between the in-order-to motives of us as a couple and as individuals.

Conclusion

Beyond those of most other social theorists, such as Mead and Cooley, who have provided us with concepts that shed light on certain elements of intersubjective understanding, Schutz’s writings reveal all the necessary elements of a coherent social theory of intersubjectivity. His writings on this topic have been invaluable in the development of various social constructionist perspectives, most prominently that of ethnomethodology. Although his work focuses on the social worlds shared among humans, it also provides a compelling framework for exploring intersubjectivity between us and members of other species who cohabit our social worlds. In the microworld of our home, interspecies intersubjectivity is a daily accomplishment. Rocky’s understanding of the natural attitude of our everyday life is manifested by his active participation in creating and maintaining a shared lifeworld and accompanying private culture. He demonstrates this through a variety of actions, only a few of which have been cited, that reflect his ability to view situations from the perspectives of other members of the family—both human and canine. He demonstrates that he assumes that we all attribute the same or compatible meaning to a variety of objects and events that constitute the lifeworld we share. He clearly
demonstrates his understanding of the reciprocity of perspectives in the consistency with which he adheres to the normative order of the household and engages in quid pro quo interaction with each of us. Moreover, as a keen observer, Rocky is quickly able to recognize behavior patterns associated with the action projects of others, such as our getting ready to leave the house. Further, his ability to distinguish between the various actions that constitute a completed act suggests an understanding of the distinction between our because and in-order-to motives. Perhaps most impressive is the fact that he is able to grasp all of this without the luxury of a shared vocal language or even the ability to hear the kinds of paralinguistic vocalizations that are commonly used to bridge language gaps.

Because of Schutz’s importance as a sociologist and his extensive treatment of the topic, I have limited my discussion to his conceptualization of mundane intersubjectivity. However, given the complexity of the concept, it is not surprising that numerous scholars have focused on different elements of the problem of intersubjective understanding. For example, Irvine discusses sharing intentions, sharing a focus of attention, and sharing emotional states as key indicators of what she calls “intersubjective relatedness” (2004, pp. 149-161). Although Schutz sees shared attention and intentionality as central ingredients in the construction of intersubjectivity, it is a clear limitation of his theory that he has little to say about shared emotional states. Thus, with reference to his theory, I can offer little empirical evidence to support my belief that Rocky and I truly shared a moment of terror as we raced to the animal hospital following his embolism. However, most humans, even those who deny the existence of animal mind, seem quite willing to acknowledge the emotional acuity of companion animals.

Of course, biological determinists, behaviorists, and other skeptics might suggest that any contributions to intersubjective understanding I attribute to Rocky are simply examples of reactions, rather than conscious responses, consistent with his biogenetic predispositions and/or various reinforcement schedules. However, aside from the fact those same attributions could be and sometimes are made for similar forms of human behavior, Rocky’s demonstrated ability to construct new behavior patterns as adaptations to his physical limitations and his ability to assimilate to a social environment created for the most part by members of a different species suggest otherwise.

As Thomas (2005) has shown, the biology of cats—unlike that of dogs, who were domesticated earlier and more completely—has changed little as a result of their accommodation to the social world of humans. In terms of behavior, cats do not appear to have the predisposition to serve and please humans that is found in dogs. Even those who live with humans maintain a
more independent orientation. Although they are capable of learning tricks, most show no interest in doing so, and they seem to respond to training schedules at their own discretion. In short, cats demonstrate considerable agency in their interaction with humans. Unlike Libby and many of our human associates, Rocky's relationship with us is not based on the extent to which we can please each other. He neither wants nor cares a great deal for approval. On the contrary, he refuses to be approved of—as evidenced by his consistently responding to any “good-boy” petting by biting and/or turning away from us. Yet he clearly desires an intimate connection with us, as evidenced by the fact that such behavior is typically followed by his returning a moment later for a more respectful form of communion. What he wants, and perhaps needs, is to be regarded—as in considered—not as a thing or a pet, but as a cat, who thinks, feels, indicates, communicates with symbols, and understands. Thus, like most others of his species, he cooperates with us humans in the joint construction of meaning, not simply because of breeding or reinforcement, but by choice.

Despite the recent animal turn in a number of disciplines, many scholars continue to deny nonhuman animals the status of autonomous agents, based on their presumed inability to use language creatively. Such a view—which ignores recent evidence and rests upon both a phonocentric definition of language and an anthropocentric view of mind (Savage-Rumbaugh, Shanker, & Taylor 1998; Hearn, 1987)—also implicitly denies the possibility of interspecies intersubjectivity. It is true that because cats cannot verbalize their thoughts in ways that we can understand—and assuming for the moment that the problem is their inability to speak in ways we can understand and not our inability to understand the ways they speak, or even a mutual problem with roots on both sides of the communication gap—neither we nor they can directly confirm the extent to which we truly understand each other. Thus, both are left with the task of attributing meaning to each other's vocalizations and gestures, and, judging from the success of our efforts, we both seem to do it pretty well. In this task, we are aided by the familiarity that emerges from extended cohabitation—that, and simply paying attention. Derrida suggests that our understanding of what it is to be human is pegged to our construction of the animal as other. Accordingly, “the said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what respond means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction” (2008, p. 8). To a long line of anthropocentric and behaviorist thinkers, the possibility of a response only makes sense within the context of interpersonal communication, but not for those who are open to and with a (as opposed to the) nonhuman animal.
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References

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