Choreographing Identities and Emotions in Organizations: Doing “Huminality” on a Geriatric Ward

Gladys L. Symons
Université du Québec
gladys.symons@enap.ca

Abstract
This paper addresses the coconstruction of identities and emotions through the human/animal relationship, arguing that nonhuman animals can and do act as coagents in interspecies encounters. The paper narrates the extraordinary boundary-transgressing experiences of a particular kind of co(a)gency labeled “huminality” (the ongoing affective relationship of human and animal). An autoethnographic account of pet-visitation involving a woman, a West Highland white terrier named Fergus, and geriatric residents demonstrates the power of huminality to authorize the emergence and realization of different identities and selves. Examples include the intimate friend, the dignified self, the institutional resister, the gift-giver, and the available self. Huminality, in the emotional spacetime of the hospital, is rooted in empathy, concern, and affection. As ontological choreography, huminality takes us past the animal-Nature/human-culture frontier into uncharted territories of spacetime to engage in forms of life with nonhuman others. Encounters with animals, even on a geriatric ward, can transform our universe and our selves.

Keywords
huminality; huminal encounter; human/animal relationship; identity; self; pet therapy; emotional spacetime; emotions in organizations; autoethnography; geriatrics; hospital; ontological choreography

Animals are mute only if we remain deaf.
Michael (1996, p. 145)

The setting is a geriatric long-term care unit in an acute care hospital in Montreal, Canada. Some 45 men and women, mostly elderly, live here, awaiting a permanent home in a long-term care facility. Approximately 80% of the residents suffer from some form of dementia; others are stroke survivors. Some are simply too elderly to live autonomously any longer. Here are men and women in varying states of physical and/or mental decline, who pass their
days trying to maintain their sense of self, preserve their identity, and find ways of coping with suffering and loss. In an attempt to deinstitutionalize the institution, the hospital provides an active program of recreational therapy, which engages the able. Among the many activities designed to create a normal **milieu de vie** is a pet therapy program, which involves visits from women and their companion dogs. This is the story of one of these dogs, a West Highland white terrier named Fergus and his human companion (and author of this paper), Gladys.

**Monday, January 16**

Sandy, the volunteer coordinator, leads Fergus and me up to the fifth floor of the hospital for our test visit with the residents. Will we be suitable to participate in the hospital’s pet therapy program? We enter a medium-sized common room painted hospital green, full of chairs and wheelchairs arranged in rows in front of a small television located in one corner. I take Fergus into my arms so he is at face level with the people seated in the wheelchairs. Snuggled contentedly against my chest, he seems quite sure of himself, as usual. I, on the other hand, am somewhat apprehensive and hug him closely, at least in part for my own emotional comfort. The scene is distressing for me, as I am unfamiliar with this milieu. The residents’ facial expressions range from suffering and pained, through weary, bored, and disinterested, to simply far, far away. As we enter the room, a few people register a distinct interest, and their bodies perk up in anticipation.

We approach Mr. D., a large, elderly man in the front row, propped up in his wheelchair with a serious scowl on his face. The contortion could be the result of pain or anger or something else I cannot decipher. He is unable to speak. With encouragement from Sandy, and a great deal of trepidation on my part, I place Fergus’s front paws on the tray of Mr. D.’s wheelchair. As his gaze turns to Fergus, his features begin to soften. The tension falls away, and a smile comes over his face. His eyes light up as he pats Fergus’s head. He begins to stroke Fergus rather vigorously, which makes me nervous. Fergus is not one to enjoy such handling by strangers, but, much to my surprise, he remains calm and still. Mr. D. relaxes and slows his touch and begins to vocalize to Fergus in a tender, affectionate voice. Responding to the tone, Fergus gazes up at him quietly.

This big, menacing-looking man is transformed before our very eyes. Gone are the anger, the aggression, and the pain. In their stead is the face of a loving, gentle, happy man, caressing a little white dog with obvious pleasure. The metamorphosis I witness is so distinct and so complete that it resembles the effect of computer morphing. I stare at Mr. D. in awe and disbelief. Fortu-
nately, he is gazing into Fergus's face, not mine. Fergus remains steadfast, calmly accepting the attention, until I lift him up and away from the table of the wheelchair. We say good-bye to Mr. D. and move deeper into the room to visit with some of the ambulatory residents, who eagerly come toward us to pet Fergus. Snuggled serenely in my arms, Fergus seems to enjoy the attention.

The next stop is the bedroom at the far end of the long, wide institutional-green hallway. I hesitate at the door and look into the room. There lies a wisp of a figure, the delicate form of the body barely visible under the bedcovers, the long, white, thin hair flowing on the pillow, the eyes closed, breathing almost undetectable. I am not certain that this body is even alive. Sandy encourages me to approach the bedside and softly addresses the frail, elderly lady.

“Mrs. S.,” she says, “would you like to see the dog?”

“Mrs. S. loves dogs,” Sandy reassures me.

Again with trepidation, I approach the bed with Fergus in my arms. Slowly the eyes open and focus on him. More slowly still, Mrs. S. props herself up on her tiny elbow. I place Fergus on the bed beside her, and her face begins to light up. She positions herself firmly now and begins to stroke Fergus's head. The light in her eyes enlivens her face as she begins to speak to him. At the sound of her voice, Fergus looks up at her and then rests his head comfortably between his paws. Mrs. S. is positively beaming now. We both interpret this gesture on his part as a sign of acceptance. He is contented and at ease by her side. Within seconds, we are engaged in enthusiastic conversation with a thoroughly delighted and thoroughly delightful elderly woman.

She asks Fergus's name, inquires about his age, his habits, and how long I have had him. She reminisces about a dog she loved and cared for long ago. Throughout the visit, Mrs. S. caresses Fergus's fluffy white fur and softly breathing body, as she eagerly welcomes the touch of that warm life in her hand. Fergus appears to enjoy the affection, for he lies quietly by her side. When he has had enough, he gently shifts position, rises, and heads for the bottom of the bed. This is my cue, and I explain to Mrs. S. that Fergus is too warm in the bed and that perhaps it is time for us to go. She agrees and waves good-bye as we exit the room. This encounter takes place every week until Mrs. S. is transferred to a long-term care facility some three months later. I doubt that she ever really knew who we were, but it does not matter. She was always transformed by our visits, as was I. I looked forward to our encounters, to witness—and share—the joy she experienced in connecting with Fergus. I miss her still.
An Autoethnographic Account

On Monday afternoons, Fergus and I don our volunteer outfits, mine a blue smock with the hospital’s volunteer insignia on the breast pocket, Fergus’s a red bandana with his name embroidered in blue (See Figure 1.). Sporting our volunteer pins and hospital ID tags, we make our way to the fifth floor, where we sit and chat with those who wish to visit with us. Our mission is to offer these geriatric residents some comfort and companionship, to alleviate their suffering, to bring them some pleasure, perhaps some fun, and—we hope—a measure of companionship and peace.

This paper is about experience and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988); it is about transgressing borders, redefining boundaries, and destabilizing binaries; it is about constructing selves and transforming identities in emotional relationships. My purpose is to narrate the extraordinary boundary-transgressing experiences of a particular kind of co(a)gency (Michael, 2004a) I call “huminality” (the on-going emotional relationship of human and animal). The text describes our encounters with humans in the hospital and offers an interpretation and introductory theorization of the process.

Figure 1. Fergus and author.
I present an autoethnographic account (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004) of my adventures into the self as part of a human-animal dyad engaged in the ontological choreography (Thompson, 2005) of pet-visitation with geriatric residents in a hospital. Specifically, my method is one of analytic autoethnography, the ethnographic practice whereby the researcher embraces full membership in the research setting and also appears as an actor in the published research texts (Anderson, 2006). Analytic autoethnography also involves an important theoretical component whereby theoretical insights generated by the analysis contribute to the understanding of broader social phenomena. In the present case, these include the processes of expanding identities, transforming selves, and orchestrating emotional spacetimes (Symons, 2007b) of caring relationships in unlikely institutional settings.

I narrate the scene from two perspectives. The first viewpoint is that of my personal experience in human-canine relationships, having spent 15 years living with Westies (four in all), and two years doing pet therapy in the hospital. The other perspective is that of an observer of others engaging in encounters and developing a relationship with Fergus. As a middle-aged white woman, sociologist, dog-guardian, posthumanist feminist, university professor, and volunteer, I communicate a situated knowledge and strive for a feminist objectivity—that is, to “become answerable for what [I] learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

My perspectives are my own. I do not speak for the institution. By taking the role of the other in this ethnographic writing, however, and by interpreting verbal and corporal conversations, I do speak for both Fergus and the humans in our encounters. As several authors have noted (Gubrium, 1986; Irvine, 2004; Pollner & McDonald-Wikler, 1985; Sanders, 1993; 1999), this process involves “doing self” for others. In this writing, I interpret contexts (spacetime), relationalities, conversations of gestures and language in terms of corporeality, feelings, emotions, identities, personhood, and selves. I hope to connect the reader with huminality through this account, to evoke the huminal experience in you rather than to represent it (Strathern, 1991, p. 7) for you.

“Huminality”

Deconstructing the Nature/culture, human/animal, and rationality/emotionality binaries has inspired this theorizing on “huminality.” Reminiscent of Latour’s (1993) hybrid (material, social, semiotic) beings, huminality involves a type of companion species (Haraway, 2003), a co(a)gency (Michael, 2004a), a human and an animal whose intra-action destabilizes the dichotomy of “human/cultural subject versus animal/natural object” (Birke, Irke, Byrld,
Lykke, 2004, p. 169). The term “co(a)gent” (Michael, 2004a, p. 10) signifies how hybrids embody coagents and encompass the cogency and power of the singularized hybrid, serving as “heuristic probes” to examine relations that are not obvious, yet are significant. The use of the term “intra-action” (Barad, 2003; Birke, Irke, Byrld, & Lykke, 2004) underlines the point that actors in a performative relationship are not distinct entities, but rather “intertwined agencies which mutually construct each other” (Birke, Irke, Byrld, & Lykke, 2004, p. 178). Huminality is evocative of Strathern’s “hidden extension” of “compatibility without comparability” (1991, p. 38). “Each extends the other,” she says, and the extensions yield different capacities and expanded capabilities.

I define “huminality” as intra-action crossing the boundary between human and animal, an enacted ongoing performance involving (in the case discussed in this paper) a member of the Homo sapiens and canine species. Huminality is a form of “embodied cross-species sociality” (Haraway, 2004, p. 297) that authorizes the emergence and realization of different identities and selves. As the subject is constituted in a relational process, both human and canine subjectivity are constituted in doing huminality. By transgressing the species boundary, I argue, animals can and do act as coagents in performances in interspecies intra-action (Birke, 2002). “Huminality,” then, encompasses the coconstruction of identities and emotions through human/animal intra-action.

In this narrative, I put Fergus front and center, for, indeed, he is the star of the show. The performance, however, needs its human extension—namely, me. Neither Fergus nor I could alone engage humans the way we do together, and the intimate relationality we share makes these encounters possible. In our volunteer work, the embodied huminality of Fergus & Gladys visits with residents and offers them and other interested humans in the proximate space-time the possibility of doing huminality. The hospital labels this activity “pet therapy” with respect to contact with the residents, while I observe similar encounters and performances with hospital employees, volunteers, and visitors as well.

The Self and Human/Animal Identities

The relationality of the huminal encounter is predicated on both human and animal selves. George Herbert Mead (1964 [1934]) outlined how, through the use of “significant symbols” (i.e. human language), the human social self is constituted in relationships. The ability to “take the role of the other” allows human beings to engage in meaningful conversation. Interestingly, Mead used animals as the basis of his theory, distinguishing between “mindless” animal
communication practiced through the “conversation of gestures” (Mead, 1964 [1934], p. 168), and mindful human communication via human language. Since animals have no language, he argued, they could have no self. (This conclusion is particularly surprising, since Mead was the guardian of a bulldog [Irvine, 2003] who apparently followed him everywhere. Did he never talk to his dog?)

My analysis questions the species barrier taken for granted by Mead (Irvine, 2004; Sanders, 1993), whose linguacentric perspective (Sanders, 2006) obstructed him from seeing animals as agents. Indeed, reviewing his “conversation of gestures” allows us to theorize beyond his analysis of animal possibilities. The study of identity and the self has come a long way since Mead (Gergen, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 1994; Taylor, 1989) and poststructuralism/postmodernism have left the core self far behind, in favor of shifting/variable/fluid subjectivities and multiple identities. Both modern and postmodern perspectives serve my purpose here. I speak of the self as a sense of personhood, the experience of a singular individual being with unique characteristics, cogency, and value. I use the term “identities” in the poststructuralist sense of variable subjectivities, thus acknowledging the possibilities for multiple identities. As Halford and Leonard point out, “identities are constructed by, and embedded in, the different places, spaces and times of particular lives” (2006, p. 1). This pertains, I shall argue, to both human and nonhuman animals.

In the hospital setting, Fergus is attributed both personhood and individuality. At the institutional level, the hospital conveys upon him the identity of “volunteer.” The process began when Fergus and I sat for identification photos for our ID cards. Beneath Fergus’s picture is written: “Fergus Symons, Bénévole” (Volunteer). His uniform (red bandana with “Fergus” embroidered in blue) also signals his institutional identity. One day, on our way through the parking lot into the hospital, Fergus suitably dressed for work, a staff member happened by. Gazing upon Fergus sporting his red bandana, she smiled broadly (the immediate response of most humans when seeing him). She inquired, “Is he a therapy dog?”

“Yes, indeed,” I proudly replied.

“Well, he certainly carries himself with dignity. He knows that he’s going on shift, doesn’t he?”

Of course he does.

Residents, staff, volunteers, and visitors alike regularly engage in constructing personhood for Fergus. Betty, for example, is a nurse we often meet on the ward. She tells me that she is afraid of dogs, yet at her first encounter with Fergus, she took a great shine to him. Every time we see her, she eagerly caresses Fergus and enthusiastically explains to me and anyone else who will listen:
“This is the only dog I can relate to!” What she is doing here is attributing personhood to Fergus, conferring an identity on him (Irvine, 2004; Sanders, 1993; 1999). Both human and animal identities are constructed in this encounter. Fergus, enacting his volunteer identity, becomes a unique individual co(a)gent, “the only dog Betty can relate to,” and, through his particular dogginess, enrolls Betty, who becomes a devotee, a kind of “Fergus-dog-person.” Thus, doing huminality with Fergus opens up new possibilities for both human and canine identities.

Upon seeing Fergus, staff, volunteers, and visitors in the hospital often discuss their current or past canine companions, attributing “self” to these dogs as they do to Fergus. Memories are triggered of intimate relations with companion dogs of long ago.

“I had two Labs,” explains Mary. “My husband died, and my brother died, and I never had any children. Those dogs were like people to me. They were such great company. I really miss them.”

Moreover, residents and others who connect with Fergus readily attribute to him a thinking mind. They frequently comment on his state of consciousness.

“Does he like to come to the hospital?”

“He is so contented.”

“He just loves to be in your arms.”

“Are you going home now? Fergus looks tired.”

Fergus is identified as a unique individual and a personage of some repute on the fifth floor. He is always addressed by name by those who can remember it, and those who cannot, ask me over and over. When we arrive on the floor, the good news is shouted in relay fashion down the hall:

“Fergus is here! Fergus is here!” Not, not incidentally, “Gladys is here,” or “Gladys and her dog are here.” Rather, the call is: “Fergus is here!” Like a magnet drawing iron filings, we are immediately surrounded by residents, staff, and visitors, all smiling and laughing, greeting and caressing Fergus. Some do, occasionally, acknowledge my presence.

Fergus enjoys a social place (Sanders, 1993) inscribed in the spacetime of the geriatric ward. He is a bona fide volunteer in the eyes of the humans with whom he comes into contact, and he is a warmly welcomed visitor. We have our seat at the table for the residents’ Monday afternoon get-together known as “Tea and Chat,” where the conversation always turns to Fergus when we arrive. We often encounter family members and other visitors on the floor, who implore us to come and “show” Fergus to their loved one. Fergus’s presence is eagerly awaited by many. Luc, a resident who is particularly fond of him, was recently out on an overnight stay and insisted that his son bring him back early so he would not miss Fergus’s Monday afternoon visit!
Huminality as Cross-Species Emotional Bonding

The overriding nature of the huminal relationality is an emotional one, an intra-action generating affection and deep fondness. Being in copresence with another species does not by itself constitute huminality. It is the nature of the relationship, the connectedness that comes from attributing personhood, from caring, and from communing with the other that gives the huminal encounter its power to coconstruct identities and to transform selves.

“Does Fergus love me?” some residents ask. I assure them that he does. I point to his body language, explaining that if he did not care for them he would not have positioned himself so close; when he sits with his back to them, I explain that it is a sign of trust, since he does not feel compelled to survey their movements, and so on. Fergus can readily engage his human audience with overt displays of affection. A favorite performance involves me propping him up with his face close to mine, at which point Fergus enthusiastically licks my cheek. This encounter is always followed by cries of delight from onlookers.

“Ahh,” they coo. “He loves you a lot.”
“You love him so much; it shows.”

What ensues is a discussion of love and affection, and the importance of the human-animal bond. The memory of love, discussing loving relationships, the joy of thinking about love—all trigger the experience of this life-giving emotion. Huminality permits love to materialize, to be witnessed, to be felt, to be experienced, either directly by engaging with Fergus, or vicariously by gazing on the corporality of our human-animal dyad.

A natural demonstration of affection is the kiss. Fergus engages his favorite friends with his canine kisses. Faces are brought close to his in expectation. If the supplicant is among the chosen, he or she will be acknowledged by Fergus’s licks to the forehead, cheek, and nose, received with squeals of delight by the human. Hands are often extended as well, requesting Fergus’s attention. He is less discriminate with hands than faces (are hands less intimate or more interesting than faces for him?) and more often than not, will oblige with licks to fingers and palms. Sara, a resident who adores Fergus (she had two Westies of her own, she tells me often), announces that she will not wash tonight to keep the memory of Fergus’s kisses on her face. “Kiss me, Fergus,” “Kiss me goodbye,” “Kiss me once again,” are regular refrains I hear when witnessing this huminality. Indeed, these canine kisses may be among the very few some of these humans ever receive. Licks on noses, foreheads, and hands are sought out and delightedly received, not only by many residents, but sometimes by staff and visitors, too.
Employees will sometimes stop in the midst of their busy chores, address us, and caress Fergus's head and body. Jean, a saint of a nurse who loves Fergus dearly, always greets us with a wide, engaging smile. One day she approaches us with a look of evident stress and fatigue on her face. It is the first time in all our visits to the hospital that I have seen Jean without a smile. She eagerly takes Fergus's little head in both her hands, looks him directly in the eye, and addresses him tenderly.

"Hello, Fergus," she sings affectionately. "How are you today?"

Fergus gives her his full attention. She then looks up at me and, with a sheepish grin, explains, "I really needed that. I needed to talk to Fergus today."

Her body relaxes, the tension falls away, and, with her usual smile now back on her face, body and soul renewed, she returns to her tasks. Yet again, I am amazed at the restorative potential of the huminal encounter.

The sense of unconditional, nonjudgmental love is an important aspect of huminality, underpinned by an immediate and solid sense of trust. I observe that the affection emanating from the huminal relationality attracts others to the encounter. In the Fergus&Gladys dyad, Fergus is seen as a loved and loving other. Moreover, when one person approaches us and connects with Fergus, it is not long before a group surrounds us, all enjoying the affection in this emotional spacetime, coconstructed through doing huminality. Huminality facilitates the coconstruction of caring relationalities built up in intra-action with others, both human and nonhuman selves.

Practicing Compassion

Those who engage with Fergus attribute a responsiveness to him, in particular that of affection, trust, caring, and concern. Fergus's reaction, always a corporal one, expresses serenity, compassion, and acceptance. One encounter is particularly memorable. Fergus and I enter Luc's room to find the small, frail 90-year-old man, dressed in a blue hospital gown, asleep in his bed. His features are contorted as if in pain. It is 3:30 on a Monday afternoon. Luc is clearly not well today. (He is usually dressed to the nines, sitting expectantly on his bed, awaiting our visits.)

We wait patiently at the foot of the bed—Fergus enveloped in my arms—for Luc to awaken. When he does, he explains that he is indeed feeling poorly today. Nonetheless, despite his pain, the smile on his face and the twinkle in his eye tell us that he is pleased that we have arrived. I place Fergus on his bed and sit down on a chair alongside it, facing the two of them. Fergus usually curls up at the foot of the bed, but this time he makes no move in that direction. Rather, he promptly lies down beside Luc and snuggles his back into Luc's side. He then lays his head on Luc's thin, frail arm, closes his eyes, and
contentedly goes to sleep. Both Luc and I are overcome with awe and affection for this little dog who knows exactly what to do in times of suffering. We (in an act of attributing personhood to him) interpret Fergus’s gesture as a response to Luc’s suffering. We see that Fergus is indeed capable of taking the role of the other, of understanding in some way that Luc is suffering and needs solace. His response is an attempt to alleviate the pain, to calm and reassure. Regardless of Fergus’s “real” intentions, which of course, we cannot know, the message of caring is transmitted and received.

Luc & Fergus, man and dog, are engaged in a conversation of gestures. This huminality allows the emergence of a perhaps long-submerged identity for Luc: the loved one, the loving one, the tender companion, the intimate friend, the caring one in warm physical contact, body to body, with another sentient being. (Who knows how long it has been since he has had a tender, caring body cuddled into his side?) Taking the role of the other (Mead, 1964 [1934]), Fergus senses (smells? uses a sixth sense to detect?) Luc’s distress and acts to relieve it. And he is right on target—as the look of joy and satisfaction on Luc’s face makes clear. Gone is the painful frown; aches and pains are momentarily forgotten. Gazing at Fergus’s small, white head on his arm, feeling the warmth of the soft, furry body next to his, Luc strokes Fergus’s back continuously, smiling proudly and contentedly, as if to say, “See how he loves me!” This conversation of gestures is ever so eloquent. I watch in fascination for some 30 minutes, unable to interrupt the tranquility and intimacy of the scene.

HUMINAL IDENTITIES ON THE GERIATRIC WARD

The Fergus & Gladys dyad enters the hospital and takes the elevator up to the fifth floor. As “dog enveloped in human arms,” we waltz from room to room, from wheelchair to wheelchair, from bed to bed, engaging staff, residents, and visitors alike in both discussion and a conversation of gestures of caring, compassion, and serenity. We begin by approaching a resident, asking if s/he is interested, and if so, positioning ourselves within touching distance. Fergus may stay in my arms or be placed on the bed or in the resident’s lap, according to the person’s wishes. The human begins to stroke the dog and if s/he can, will talk to him. With or without the vocalization, however, the conversation of gestures continues. A sense of calm and serenity envelops the emotional space-time of this encounter. If Fergus is so inclined, and the potential recipient indicates his or her willingness, he will lick the human’s hand or face. Or, if he is on the bed, he may simply curl up near the person’s feet and go to sleep. I watch for signs that the encounter is coming to a close. If I see that the resident is tired, we quietly take our leave. At other times, it is Fergus who
indicates that he is ready to move on. He simply stands up and looks at me. I take my cue and explain that it’s time to say good-bye for today. I thank the resident for our visit, and we are thanked enthusiastically in return. Fergus receives a parting caress, and we are off to our next encounter.

Expanding Capabilities and Horizons

Connecting with Fergus in huminality allows for the extension of self. As Irvine notes, “[C]omplex and therefore satisfying relationships with animals . . . [expand] the experience of self” (2004, p. 67). For those in the hospital setting who possess sufficient animal capital\(^\text{10}\) to be open to the experience, Fergus’s visit is a welcomed opportunity to do huminality and to engage in authentic communication. Fergus is the trusting friend, the trusted confidant, the understanding, voiceless “other.” He provides a portal to other identities besides that of the hospital patient, the fifth-floor resident awaiting transfer.

Inspired by Haraway, Michael (1996) describes identity construction in the animal-human relationship:

The identity that is thus generated is one that no longer follows the linearities of narrative, but is one mediated by and realized in the many channels of human-animal communication. . . . Thus, over and above the identities that are reflected in owners’ narration of the animal-human dyad, it is the form of non-linguistic communication that becomes the content of human identity in the association between human and animal companions. So, animals, in all their other-worldliness, enrol humans; but the identity that they offer them is of a different order from the typical modes of the human social self . . . here we have an expansion of identity. For humans who venture into associations with animal companions, horizons are enlarged and variety is enabled. (p. 144)

Through my experience with huminality in the hospital, I have witnessed many particularly striking demonstrations of the power of the huminal encounter. I have chosen to narrate the following two because of what they say to me about identities. The first I interpret as an attempt to re-establish an identity that is being erased, and the second as an invocation of identities long past.

Maintaining the Dignity of a Lady

We are chatting quietly with Margaret, a petite, poised, and delicate lady, perhaps in her midsixties, who, even while dressed in a blue hospital gown, carries herself with dignity and grace. Margaret shares aspects of her biography with us, confidently yet demurely presenting her identity. “My husband was a psychotherapist,” she explains. “I’m a social worker.” She goes on to tell the
story of Jack. “When I was a child, my mother spoke fondly and often of her
dear, departed ‘Jack,’ a much-loved family member. We thought she was talk-
ing about an uncle who died in his youth. As it turns out, ‘Jack’ was a little
terrier she had before she was married. That dog had the status of a legitimate
family member.”

We are caught up in her memories when, all of a sudden, a tall, physically
imposing attendant, clipboard in hand, charges into the room and comes to
an abrupt halt menacingly close to Margaret’s small frame. Perfunctorily
excusing herself, the attendant interrupts our conversation, and, in a loud
official-sounding voice, rudely demands to know if Margaret has had a bowel
movement that day. She then proceeds to shout the same question across the
room to another resident, this time in colloquial French, employing language
one would use with a child.

“As-tu fait caca aujourd’hui?”11 she bellows.

Margaret is clearly distressed to be asked such a question in this unseemly
manner, and to hear this type of language, particularly in front of visitors. We
are both embarrassed, and I am surprised and annoyed, although I try not to
show my displeasure with the employee’s rude and disrespectful behavior.
With head bowed, avoiding eye contact with the attendant, Margaret replies
meekly, “Yes.” She then turns directly to Fergus, strokes his head, and gathers
her dignity around him. She addresses him in a quiet, respectful, and com-
plicit voice: “That’s not the kind of conversation we engage in, in polite com-
pany, is it, Fergus?”

Yet again, I am amazed by this scene. Here, huminality opens up the possi-
bility for the emergence of an erased and negated self—the dignified self, the
respected self. Margaret calls upon Fergus as a confidant in this embarrassing
situation, to help her safely express her indignation and regain her dignity. The
“call of Nature” has been inappropriately called up, and Margaret, securely
grounded in the presence of Nature, calls upon Fergus, as “Nature,” to civilize
the social space. Fergus, by his simple corporal presence in this huminality—
she reaches out and strokes his head—helps Margaret redefine the situation
and regain her sense of self-worth. The encounter illustrates both the power
and the paradox of huminality in this hospital setting. The nonhuman animal
agency imports Nature into the spacetime of the hospital, making the institu-
tion seem more “natural” and “normal”—more like a “human” environment.
Margaret often mentions how important it is to meet Fergus in the hospital.
“It gives you a sense of the ‘normal’,” she declares.

And with a frustrated slap to the wall behind her, she adds, “Seeing an ani-
mal in here tells you that there is more to the world than just these institu-
tional walls.”
Institutional Resistance and Gift-Giving

We arrive in his bedroom to find Luc all dressed up in his blue plaid shirt and beige slacks. (He’s lost a fair amount of weight since this outfit was first purchased.) Perched jauntily on his bed, he is expecting us, as I’ve marked our visiting days on the calendar tacked to the wall over his night table. He has a twinkle in his eye and is grinning broadly. It is amazing to gaze upon this ninety-year-old face and see through the weathered, wrinkled skin and stubby beard a lively spirit of resistance. Here is the rebel! He has broken the rules, joué un tour, disobeyed the authorities, pulled a fast one. He is almost giggling with delight and is so very proud of himself. As Fergus and I approach his bed, he gestures to the night table.

“Look in the drawer,” he chuckles.

I open the drawer and peer in. Much to his amusement, I exclaim in astonishment, “Oh, Luc, you didn’t!”

Fergus picks up on the game and begins to squirm excitedly in my arms. I get the joke, and Luc and I begin to laugh. Fergus can’t wait for the action to begin. There, on a small, white plastic plate, is a serving of cooked ham. Luc has saved the ham from his lunch tray for Fergus! Thrilled at this opportunity, Fergus gobbles down the treat, while Luc and I thoroughly enjoy the performance.

The wonder of this huminal encounter is its ability to allow for the emergence of the independent self, to provide a space for institutional resistance even under the very constraining circumstances of residence in a hospital geriatric ward. Knowing that he should be eating all the food on his tray, Luc breaks the rules and hides part of his meal as a treat for Fergus.

But there is more. Another identity emerges from this huminal encounter—that of the giving self, the caring self. Shedding his patient identity, the one who is cared for, Luc becomes the caregiver, taking care of Fergus. What a thrill it is to be able to attend to another, to prepare in anticipation for another’s visit, “[s]’habiller le cœur,”12 to arrange a gift, to offer a treat to a loved one. Huminality affords the possibility in this most unlikely of settings.

Huminality as Ontological Choreography

Huminality weaves together many ontological domains such as Nature and culture, human and nonhuman animals, corporality and emotionality, institutions, organizations, relationalities, identities, and selves. Thompson (2005) has identified this coordination of elements from different ontological orders as “ontological choreography” (p. 8). Huminality affords us an interesting site
to study such choreographic work, and I have described some of its effects in this paper.

As ontological choreography, huminality is attentive to elements of space-time. Corporality and proximities of bodies and their language in the huminal encounter call our attention to the meaning and relevance of space, as does the glaring institutional architectural space of the geriatric ward. Huminality also evokes very different kinds of time. The hospital’s bureaucratic time regulates the Fergus&Gladys scheduled performance on Monday afternoons, but, as Luc’s experience reveals, even this bureaucratic time can be transformed by huminality. The time spent awaiting Fergus’s visit becomes a joyful time of anticipation, a time to “s’habiller le cœur.” Huminality can also transport us back in time, where memories evoke experiences of huminal connections with canine companions of long ago.

Moreover, huminality is one of the few relationalities that can erase time as a measure of biological age. Unlike interaction with babies or young children, cross-species encounters do not trigger age concerns. We are never old with our dog. What a relief to be freed of this most restrictive of statuses on the geriatric ward! As with the able/disabled frontier (whether it be one of dementia/sanity or physical dis/ability), huminality transgresses the time barrier of chronological age. In the emotional spacetime of doing huminality, the effects of time and age and the space of physical/mental dis/ability present no obstacle to love.

Most impressive, perhaps, is the experience of huminality that can take us out of bureaucratic clock-time altogether. By providing the opportunity to practice “availability,” (Symons, 2007b) huminality frees us from quantitative time and transports us into a qualitative time of fully attending to the other, grounding us in the “now.” In fact, doing huminality is a form of “availability,” a type of relatioality that embraces the three crucial aspects of qualitative time, namely, timing, copresence, and active listening (Symons, 2007b, pp. 15-16). Availability is key to the huminal encounter.

The Paula&Fergus huminality provides a charming example of availability and expanded identities. Paula is an elderly Asian-Canadian who speaks very softly, her French idiom heavily accented. I often ask her to repeat herself, as I have difficulty hearing and understanding what she says. But not Fergus. He understands her perfectly. They engage each other completely in their conversation of gestures. Arriving at the door of her room, we find her in her usual spot, dressed and sitting on the made-up bed. A big smile comes over her face when she sees us, which is our invitation to enter. She pats the bed beside her, and I place Fergus on the spot. She begins to scratch his back, an indulgence he cannot resist. He settles in for the treatment, and she chats gaily with him.
When he wants another section done, he simply turns that particular part of his body toward her and settles in again. She giggles in delight and glances at me to make sure I am watching the conversation. I chuckle in approbation, always amused by Fergus's antics. At some point in the performance, Fergus decides he wants his tummy rubbed and rolls over on his back, four little paws in the air. Paula laughs heartily and promptly responds to his wishes, caressing his soft, white belly. When he's had enough, he simply rolls upright and heads toward the foot of the bed where I am standing. He looks up and catches my eye. I take him in my arms, thank Paula for her kindness, and say goodbye. Paula is enchanted and so very pleased to have had the opportunity to practice her nurturing self, to offer her available self. She is rightly proud of her ability to engage Fergus in the performance. Fergus has made her day—and Paula & Fergus, mine.

As this encounter suggests, huminality offers a new interpretation and understanding of Mead's conversation of gestures. It is important to examine not just speech (Barad, 2003), but also the emotional conversation of gestures. Huminality allows us to see through, and go beyond, the spoken language to communicate with (at least some) other species. In conversation, people can fail to listen to the verbal message and only “hear” or “read” the underlying emotional one. Or, conversely, they can hear the verbal message and not understand its emotional content. Moreover, the verbal and emotional messages are not always congruent! In huminality, there is only one message—the corporal and emotional one. The primary contact in the huminal encounter is at the level of emotion, as Fergus cuts directly to the affective content of the intra-action. Many authors (Coren, 2004; Irvine, 2004) have analyzed the capacity of animals to connect with humans at this emotional level. Sanders (1993), for example, describes caretakers’ sentiments:

The chief pleasure they derived from the animal-human relationship was the joy of relating to another being who consistently demonstrated love—a feeling for the other that was honestly felt and displayed and not contingent on the personal attributes or even the actions of the human other. (p. 218)

Conclusion

In this text, I have tried to narrate the transformative power of huminality in the emotional spacetime of a hospital geriatric ward. The human/animal boundary fades as the animality of the human (always present, yet almost always ignored) and the emotionality of the animal (also always present, but often ignored) are brought into focus, and the authentic connection fostered
through huminality attests to the precariousness of the human/animal divide. Both the subjectivity and agency of human and nonhuman animals are embodied in huminality. Canine and human are drawn together in this particular geriatric setting of vulnerable, marginal, and often voiceless bodies.

I have chosen to identify this phenomenon as “huminality” because I believe that a profound and moving experience such as this one deserves its proper designation. The concept draws its originality from its particular focus on the self-enhancing, self-expanding, and identity-transforming possibilities of this extraordinary human-animal encounter. Huminality provides meaning at institutional, interpersonal, and personal levels. It challenges the rationality/emotionality dichotomy of the modern bureaucratic organization (Symons, 2001; 2007a) by coconstructing the important role of emotions for employees and clients alike. The instrumental rationality of the hospital is confronted with the emotional power of the huminal encounter. Huminality comforts and amuses, energizes and soothes. This analysis of the huminal performance waltzing on a geriatric ward suggests new possibilities for orchestrating emotions in organizations and coconstructing an organizational spacetime of compassion and serenity in a context of tension and stress, of human suffering and loss. Doing huminality in the hospital helps patients, their families, staff, and administrators get through the day. Connected, enriched residents mean less-stressed employees, a situation that translates into a more positive work environment for staff and a healthier living space for patients.

At the interpersonal level, huminality enhances social capital (Wood, Giles-Corti, Bulsara, & Bosch, 2007). We often visit bedrooms with two or four residents to a room, where each is positioned solitarily in his or her corner. Through engaging with Fergus, they are brought into conversation with one another, and, if they are ambulatory, they gather together around us. By the time we leave, the residents are enthusiastically engaged in lively debate, swapping stories and having fun. One day we are invited to a cancer unit to visit a woman pining for her dog. Her roommate is sitting alone on the far side of the room, wearing an oxygen mask. We are not two minutes into that room before the woman takes off her mask, comes toward us admiring Fergus, and eagerly joins in the conversation! As we leave, the two ladies are chatting happily together, the oxygen mask forgotten. At the personal level, we find the expansion of horizons and identities, many examples of which have been described in this paper—all made possible through huminality. By respecting the integrity of the animal as a revered and valuable life, that same valued identity is mirrored back to the sender, and our sense of self-worth is enhanced.

The concept of huminality has an important contribution to make in a number of areas. It can broaden the conversation on the study of care
(Donovan, 2006; Thomas, 1993) and on nursing research and emotional labor (James, 1989; Smith, 1992). It is relevant for understanding the intra-action of animals in other organizational settings such as pet-therapy programs in prisons (Furst, 2007), animals in schools (Hergovich, Monshi, Semmler, & Ziegelmayer, 2002), veterinary work (Atwood-Harvey, 2005; Sanders, 1999), K-9 squads (Sanders, 2006), sniffer-dogs and mounted police, as well as the dynamics of the human/guide-dog relationality (Sanders, 1999).

As well as its obvious application to the literature on canine companion animals, huminality offers a fresh understanding of the human-animal bond with other domestic animals such as cats (Alger and Alger, 1997; 2003) and horses (Brandt, 2004; Game, 2001). Huminality can contribute to the philosophical and ethical debate concerning humane treatment of nonhuman animals (Ferguson, 2004; McKenna and Light, 2004). The concept also speaks to the methodological issues concerning human-animal studies (Franklin, Emmison, Haraway, & Travers, 2007; Irvine, 2004; Sanders, 1999; Wilson, Allen, Lago, Marz, & Melson, 1994), demonstrating the power of qualitative methodologies such as autoethnography to explore the complexity of the huminal cross-species sociality. Moreover, huminality is relevant to the domain of cognitive ethnology (Bekoff, 2006) and underscores the importance of respecting the ontological status of nonhuman animals and acknowledging their specificity and otherness (Haraway, 2003; 2004; Noske, 1997).

Finally (but not exhaustively), the concept of huminality challenges sociology to rethink notions of sociality, the human-animal interface, and “human society”13 (Franklin, 1999; Hobson-West, 2007; Myers, 2003). It adds a useful perspective to the debate on the post-Meadian self (Alger & Alger, 1997; Irvine, 2003; 2004; Konecki, 2005; Myers, 2003; Sanders, 1993; 1999) and invites organizational sociology to expand its horizons and explore the impact of this fascinating relationality with the “other” in organizational life.

Huminality takes us past the animal-Nature/human-culture frontier, well into uncharted territories of spacetime, to engage in forms of life with nonhuman others—and beyond. “Animals are not lesser humans; they are other worlds” (Noske, 1997, p. 6), and our encounters with them in various settings—even on a geriatric ward—can transform our universe and our selves.

Notes


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2. All names, except Fergus and Gladys, are pseudonyms.
3. This is one important way in which autoethnography differs from traditional participant observation, where the researchers’ reflexive analyses of their own experiences and feelings are documented in the observation notes but do not become part of the published report.
4. Emotional spacetime consists of a type of socially constructed affective relationality unfolding within both quantitative and qualitative time frames, ongoing in certain physical sites and/or social spaces (which may include cyberspace) within and around organizations. Bound by space and time, these relationalities are constituted and interpreted in terms of emotions (Symons, 2007b).
5. The term relationality is meant to emphasize the processual activity of relating, underscoring the fact that relations are not static, but that “such associations or connections have to be ongoingly enacted” (Michael, 2004b, p. 293).
6. Sometimes, at this juncture, the academic debate on anthropomorphism is raised. As Fox (2006) points out, however, this discussion is based on a particular construction of the “rational human subject” (p. 535). Huminality challenges this definition of subjectivity.
7. There is neither space nor time to debate the distinctions here. I take up the issue in a forthcoming paper entitled “The human-canine connection: Exploring the Jungian self through huminality.”
8. While Fergus is not a volunteer in the strict sense of the word (I volunteered both of us to the job), it is the identity conferred upon him by all members in the hospital setting. He is socially defined as a caring and generous soul who gives of himself to help others.
9. In our two years of volunteer work, Fergus never once growled or barked while on duty.
10. Irvine (2004) cleverly extends Bourdieu’s (1985) notion of social capital (practical knowledge) to experience with, and understanding and appreciation of, animals.
11. “Have you pooped today?”
12. “To prepare one’s heart” (Saint-Exupéry, 1959, p. 472)
13. Which, of course, is not solely “human.”

References


