

Experiences of pet death in childhood memories

Abstract

Studying relationships with animals in childhood illustrates cultural conceptions of animals as well as those about children and childhood. Similarly, childhood experiences related to animal death demonstrate associated rituals, practices and conceptions. In this chapter, I scrutinize the memories of animal death in childhood, based on data comprising narratives collected in a nationwide writing collection on human–pet relations in Finland. The data used includes the authors’ memories of animal death in childhood. Theoretically, the study draws on recent studies about childhood and about human–animal relations, with a relational viewpoint that emphasizes emotions and embodiment.

The study suggests that there are special meanings involved in relations with animals in childhood, and these are epitomized in the experiences of animal death. The memories analyzed illustrate the position of animals as friends and family members already before pet keeping became a central part of home and family. Animal companions have been lost and killed, buried and mourned, and their death is frequently contextualized in the experiences of growing up. In the childhood memories analyzed in this study, the human–animal boundary does not appear clear-cut but instead, mourning the loss of an animal bears similarities to mourning the death of a human. However, grief for a dead animal has been culturally forbidden, which is seen in parents’ relative silence and the challenges faced in communicating the grief between parents and children.

Keywords: childhood, death, emotions, Finland, human–animal relations, memory, pets

Introduction

The practices and conceptions concerning animal death are closely associated to the different ways in which the conceptual boundary between humans and animals is understood, transgressed, and reinforced. The norms and practices that shape death are different in the case of humans and that of non-human animals and, therefore, transformations in the conceptions regarding death, killing, and mourning animals illustrate the complexity of the human–animal boundary. Moreover, the boundary is always contextual (Charles & Davies,

2011). In can be asked, for example, how is animal death experienced and understood in the context of childhood, in regard to the human–animal boundary?

In late modernity, keeping pets in families with children has become increasingly common, at the same time as child–pet relationships have been promoted as beneficial for the development of children (Russell, 2016; Tipper, 2011). However, relatively little attention has been paid to individual relationships with pets in childhood, let alone experiences of the death of a pet. When a pet dies, there are several issues to consider: relationships between humans and animals, children and adults, children and pets, as well as children and death. Studying relationships with animals in childhood illustrates cultural conceptions regarding animals and their death as well as children and childhood.

In this chapter, I scrutinize memories of animal death in childhood, based on data comprising narratives on human–pet relations collected in Finland. The study aims to make visible the ways in which human–animal relations and death are understood in the cross-generational context, based on the narrators’ memories of experiences ranging from agrarian times to the urban pet-keeping culture. In the study I ask, in what ways are experiences of animal death described in childhood memories? The focus is on the loss and grief experienced at the death of animals understood as pets by the narrators. I pay special attention to the ways in which cultural conceptions, norms and practices that define the appropriate ways of relating to and grieving the death of an animal for both children and adults are reflected on in the narratives. I also discuss the methodological challenges regarding the study of adults’ childhood memories.

Theoretically, the chapter draws on discussions of relationality, emphasizing the emotional and embodied aspects of human–animal relationships (Acampora, 2001). Child–animal relationships have often been described as a phenomenon that is natural to childhood, and children, perceived as innocent, have been paralleled to animals (Tipper, 2011). In more recent studies, however, children have been understood as active agents with meaningful social relationships with others, including animals (Tipper, 2011; Wyness, 2012, p. 62). In this study, I reject the naturalization of child–pet relationships and appreciate the subjectivity and agency of children, similarly to those of animals.

Companion animals, childhood and death

Animals that share their lives with humans in close companionship can be termed pets or companion animals (Charles & Davies, 2011). A pet is given a human name, it shares the home with a human, and its body is not used for human consumption (Thomas, 1983, p. 112–115). These animals are often understood as conscious and sentient subjects and agents, who interact with humans and share their everyday life with them in meaningful ways (Charles, 2014). Relationships with animals based on kinship in such a way have a possibility to blur the categorical boundary between humans and non-human animals, resulting in interpretations of ‘posthuman families’ (Tipper, 2011).

A substantial number of pets in Western countries live in families with children, which suggests that “families place children and pets firmly together within the sphere of domestic life” (Russell, 2016, p. 83). Pets are often acquired on children’s initiative, and children call them siblings, best friends, and confidants (Charles, 2014). Children know the animals they live with individually, and they interact and communicate with them and described them as close friends who listen to them in moments when adults cannot (Leinonen, 2013, p. 70; Morrow, 1998). Children tell their pets their secrets, and especially dogs give children an opportunity to move outside the home (Morrow, 1998). Pets are part of the family network, and their position as family members is largely based on the duration of their co-habitation with humans and the quality of the relationship (Tipper, 2011).

When pets die, the practices and understandings concerning their death illustrate the position of pets and cultural conceptions regarding human–pet relationships, but they also reflect recent transformations in the ways of relating to death in the West. It has been argued that death has become a silenced subject and expressing grief openly has become forbidden in modern societies. Bauman (1992, 134), for instance, writes that “death has become a guilty secret.” Giddens, on the other hand, (1991) suggests that death has been moved away from the public sphere, rendering grief a private process. The idea of death as a taboo has increasingly been challenged, suggesting that “relationships between the living and the dead are being rediscovered” (Howarth, 2007, p. 19). It is characteristic to human death in late modern society that it can partly be controlled by the medical science, as terminal illnesses can increasingly be managed (Bauman, 1992). The death of animals is controlled by humans to a far greater extent, as most ‘domesticated’ animals are killed by humans (Marvin, 2006). Killing animals emphasizes the hierarchical boundary between humans and animals, as the human is the only animal whose killing is considered murder (Haraway 2008, p. 79–80).

Animal death, including pet euthanasia and grieving for the loss of a pet, is regulated by cultural norms and practices (Redmalm 2015). They include norms regarding the ethically appropriate killing of animals in different circumstances, but they also define the rules concerning feeling and expressing emotions about the death of animals (Morrow, 1998; Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 26–36). The death of a pet is mourned in much the same way as a human’s death but, according to Redmalm (2015), it is ambivalent in the sense that it reflects the status of animals as either resembling humans or different from them. The animal is often mourned as a separate, sentient being and a partner in a social relationship, comparable to a close human. In situations where expressing the grief is risky or too much of a burden to the mourner, the pet is distanced to the position of an animal different from humans.

In the following section, I discuss the methodology of this study, after which I analyze the emotions and meanings attached to the grief over the death of a pet, the difficulty of parental support, and experiences of unjustified killings, before drawing conclusions on the analysis.

Using childhood memories as data

Childhood relationships with animals have been investigated by studying children themselves, but also by exploring adults’ childhood memories, as I will do in this chapter. The data for this study comes from a nationwide writing collection under the title *The cat, the dog, and the horse – the animal as a family member (Kissa, koira, hevonen – eläin perheenjäsenenä)*, organized by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in 2014–2015. The writing collection was announced widely in Finnish magazines and social media. People were encouraged to write about their memories and experiences of sharing their life with pets, including experiences of animal death. I was personally involved in designing the themes for the collection.

Narratives collected in writing collections are typically autobiographical (Latvala & Laurén, 2013). Autobiographical narratives about human–animal relations can be used to explore shared experiences between the human and the animal, and the cultural meanings given to them (Leinonen, 2013, p. 67). Smith and Watson (2010, p. 15) nevertheless point out that the concept of truth in autobiographical writing is not easily defined: “[a]ny utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer”. As Jones (2008, p. 199) points out, in researching childhood “we need to be extra vigilant and reflexive about how we approach, engage with and render the other in our research accounts

and conceptualisations of children/childhood”. This is especially true about research based on adults’ childhood memories as data. Memory is relational, and in narrating childhood memories, the authors engage with their childhood self (Russell, 2016). Jones (2003, p. 27) notes that “[m]emory is not just a retrieval of the past from the past, it is always a fresh, new creation”. This means that the child of the past as well as the others remembered in the narrative – human and non-human – are always represented by the one who writes the narrative (Russell, 2016). In experiential narratives such as the ones analyzed in this chapter, the authors reflect on their own life events and experiences in a way that makes sense to themselves (Latvala & Laurén, 2013). Narrated experiences are part of cultural meaning-making as they provide access to past experiences by giving them meanings in the present. They thereby assist in understanding temporality and change.

For the writing collection, 193 responses were received, comprising 1187 pages in total. For this study, I selected 111 descriptions of animal death experienced in childhood. Of the 65 narrators whose texts were included, 60 were women and five men. The authors were born in the years 1919–1998, and the data thus includes childhood memories from the 1920s to the early 2000s, reflecting the transformations from the agrarian culture to the present. For the purposes of the analysis, I thematized the data in three themes: the emotions related to animal death, the role of adults, and how the author experienced the event ethically. Throughout the analysis, I pay attention to the ways in which the authors reflect on their memories at the time of writing them.

Grief over the death of a pet

In the narratives, childhood relationships with animals are described in detail, and nearly all narratives end in the death of the animal. Animals typically died in accidents or were killed in different ways. Very rarely did they die naturally. The authors describe their attachment to animals in childhood as a strong emotional experience. They often grew up with puppies and kittens but also with foals, calves, lambs, and piglets, which they cared for and considered pets, close friends, and family members (see Leinonen, 2013, p. 71). In this chapter, I concentrate on relationships with animals understood as pets, leaving out the slaughter of farm animals.

The death of a close animal is remembered in the data as a very sad event. As one author states, “you experience the death of an animal more strongly when you are a child, and I also

mourned Riku for a long time” (SKS KRA. *Pets* 40–43. 2015). According to Jones (2003), children’s lives are more emotional than adults’ lives. This is evident in childhood memories, also because memories not only consist of past events but also of emotional responses to those events (Jones, 2003). Many authors express a longing for an animal they have lost as a child, even as they are writing about the event as adults, as in the following example from the 1970s: “I dreamt about Netta every now and then until only a few years ago. These dreams only ended – almost – when our own dog Pike came into the household in 2009” (SKS KRA. *Pets* 189–190. 2015). When the dead pet is defined as ‘only’ an animal, different from humans, it can easily be replaced with a new one (Redmalm, 2015). If, on the other hand, the pet is seen as a friend or family member comparable to humans, it is perceived as irreplaceable, at least immediately after death. Such a case is described in the following example from the time of World War II:

For a few years, he was our joy. Then he got distemper and was paralyzed. Mother knew a car driver who carried a gun, and he euthanized our friend. Life felt empty after Evacuee’s death. Aunts, uncles, cousins and Father were away from home at the war front, and the animal friend was also gone. Already then I decided that I would never have a dog myself, as losing it is so hard. (SKS KRA. *Pets* 92–115. 2015)

In agrarian times, it was common to kill kittens, sometimes also puppies, because there were simply too many animals. This was sometimes the case in the countryside even in the 1980s: “Grandpa put them down by throwing them against a rock. It still feels horrible, because I saw it with my own eyes” (SKS KRA. *Pets* 922–927. 2015). Animals were usually killed at home, because there was no other way and the neutering and euthanizing of small animals by veterinarians was not common practice before the 1960s. For children, the frequent killings of young animals were a painful experience.

In the narratives, there are several references to pet burials in the decades following WWII, usually at the farmyard or summer cottage. With the development of pet-keeping culture, features of human death rituals, such as burying and mourning practices, have been adapted to the death of pets (Kean, 2013). According to Tipper (2011), the body has a special significance in childhood, and this is evident in detailed descriptions of the bodies of dead animals. These descriptions reveal the significance of the event to the author:

Soon after this White Spot was hit by a train. It was completely cut in two in the middle, and its open green eyes stared at the sky. It took a long time before I stopped mourning it, because it was my cat. Its remains were buried in the garden. (SKS KRA. Pets 116–117. 2015)

If the animal died in wintertime when the ground was frozen, digging a grave was not possible. In the following example, the animal continues its embodied presence in the life of the author during a long liminal phase between death and disposal of the body: “The cat could not be buried in winter, so it was kept in a cardboard box in the greenhouse. I went there every now and then to pet the cat’s body” (SKS KRA. Pets 441–442. 2015). Here, touching the body of the dead cat is described as a pleasant experience, which serves the purpose of mourning the feline friend. In the narrative it is presented as an embodied memory, epitomizing the emotional and embodied relationship with the childhood pet (cf. Russell, 2016). It can also be interpreted as representing the child’s agency in actively managing the continuation of the relationship after death (Howarth, 2007). There are also examples in the data of the agency of the animal at the moment of death, as in the following memory about the death of a guinea pig in the 1970s:

I remember the morning when I was leaving for school and we looked each other in the eye. Tiku was very weak and reaching for me, his gaze still touches me. It was a farewell gaze and those stay with you forever. There is a lot of feeling in them. I think animals understand more than people understand that they understand. (SKS KRA. Pets 607–609. 2015)

Again, the relationship appears to continue after death, this time in the narrator’s interpretation of the pet’s gaze as an eternal “farewell gaze”. The narrator further contemplates the gaze, to the extent of attributing significant understanding to it. She thus acknowledges the animal’s agency, which dissolves the hierarchical human–animal boundary (Charles & Davies, 2011). It also contributes to the grief felt, as without acknowledging the animal’s agency it would be much easier to encounter the death of the pet and the end of the relationship.

The challenge of parental support

Human–animal relations are always situated in the surrounding world of social relations, norms, conceptions, and practices, and this is also the case in childhood (Russell, 2016). In the data, it is evident that in agrarian times, killing animals has been the realm of adults, regardless of the relationship between the child and the animal: “We, the children, felt sad when the grown-ups decided to put Terri down. Maybe he was not a good hunting dog. Children’s views were not asked nor heard” (SKS KRA. Pets 655. 2015). Children were not permitted in the world of death and, in several accounts, parents tried to protect them from seeing the killing of a beloved animal. Instead of keeping the children happy, this practice has apparently resulted in some of the most painful memories of animal death. They also illustrate the distances between children’s and adults’ experiences and understandings of animals, emotions and morality (cf. Jones, 2008).

In the narratives, memories of the loss of a pet appear as isolated experiences in childhood. According to Giddens (1991, p. 167–169), a sudden encounter with death can be a shock. The authors write about close and meaningful relationships with animals in childhood, and their own emotional reaction to the death of such an animal is remembered vividly. In contrast, the narratives reveal the relative absence of parental support at the moment of loss:

One day, when the inseminator arrived at the yard, Misse hid herself under the car, in front of the back wheel. And when the inseminator left, she went too. I don’t know where, but only a little lifeless body was left. Someone came and picked it up. I did not cry. I did not say anything. And I was not taken on the lap by anyone. (SKS KRA. Pets 266–332. 2015)

What is striking in the narrative is the absence of any expression of grief or consolation. Mourning a dead pet has been considered an instance of ‘forbidden grief’ that cannot, according to cultural norms, be expressed openly (Taylor, 2013). The experience of loss and the relationship between the mourner and the deceased are not recognized, leading to a difficulty in sharing the grief and a lack of consolation to the mourner. The lack of parental support in the context of animal death is an example of how forbidden grief may be experienced in child–adult relationships. For adults, the death of an animal is a controversial event, and expressing the emotions related to it may not have been possible without ridicule (Tipper, 2011). As one author states, “in the old times it was not allowed to show grief over the euthanasia of a pet, at least if you were an adult” (SKS KRA. Pets 404–405. 2015). The

silence over the grief over losing an animal emphasizes the difference between humans and animals and therefore reinforces the human–animal boundary.

Emotional attitudes towards animals are not a new phenomenon. Instead, expressing these emotions has become more acceptable after urbanization distanced farm animals from everyday life and pet-keeping gained in popularity (Charles, 2014). In child–adult relationships, on the other hand, the transformations following WWII led to more open communication between children and adults (Cunningham, 2006, p. 213–219). Both of these developments are visible in the narratives. Accounts of more recent events illustrate how the grief over animal death is shared with parents, as in the following example from the early 2000s:

I remember how Mother came to my room late at night and said that we may have to put Nana down. At first I did not understand what Mother meant, but gradually I realized the sad truth. I remember my last day with Nana, when I hugged her and hoped that time would stop and Nana would not leave my side. Soon we sat in the car outside the vet clinic and watched Mother lead Nana away. I prayed for Nana to come back. I was struck by grief when I saw my mother walk back without Nana. (SKS KRA. Pets 473. 2015)

Here, the mother takes the child all the way through the experience while still protecting her from seeing the actual killing. The experience is very different from those in the memories of agrarian times. The changes have, however, been slow and difficult, as can be seen in the example from the 1970s, where the parent tries, in vain, to protect the child from the shock of killing:

I stroked Lotta for the last time. Father took her out and I stayed inside with Mother. After some time I went outside. I noticed Father there and started walking closer. Then, suddenly, I saw him sling the cat against the stone wall of the outbuilding. We both flinched. I, for seeing the violent death of my dear pet, he, for me to be staring there. Father's expression was not delighted. (SKS KRA. Pets 607–609. 2015)

Experiences of ethically unjustified killings

It is a recurrent theme in the narratives that children's possibilities to control the death of animals are limited. Many respondents recount the practice of killing a pet without first telling the child about it. Sometimes the fate of the animal has remained a mystery, as in the following example from the 1960s:

I was 15 or 16 years old. One day, when I came home from school, Mirri wasn't there anymore. I never got to know the full truth about Mirri's death. My impression was that one of my father's co-workers had euthanized our pet. Why? By whom? Where was Mirri buried? (SKS KRA. Pets 2–5. 2015)

Many authors feel that the killing of their pet was unjustified. It has been hard to understand the adults' motives for killing, as they have not been openly discussed in the family. Emotions felt for an animal assist in remembering the specific events related to its death, and the descriptions of unjustified killings are often detailed:

Pörri's life was very short. Aunt Riitta died in December 1961 and Irja from Mustola was preparing the funeral. Her brother Antti took her to our house, and I heard my father say to Antti that there was a "black hare" in the house. That night Pörri disappeared. I decided then, although being a minor, that this was the first and last dog that anybody killed without my permission. (SKS KRA. Pets 335–343. 2015)

In another example from the 1950s, the author describes the unexpected killing of the children's pet dog as cruel:

The most terrible shock came when, close to Christmas and after this visit, we went to my uncle's. My aunt invited us 'big girls' upstairs to see a surprise. And what a surprise! By the door to my uncle's study there was a smallish black dog skin. "There's Tarjukka now!" my aunt said and added something that was even more shocking: "Tarjukka was euthanized by shooting in the head, at the Pengerkatu police station." (I haven't as yet been able to decide whether my aunt was a conscious sadist. For us girls Tarjukka's death was a matter of grief, and showing/using the skin was cruel). (SKS KRA. Pets 153–172. 2015)

Both narratives reveal a feeling of powerlessness expressed by the authors, regarding the fate of their pet. In the first excerpt, the author feels that she should have had the right to decide on the life of her own pet. In the second one, the adults' actions render the death of the pet

purely material, epitomized by the use of the dog's skin. Although preserving the skin of animals was quite common in agrarian times, for the author the dog is a sentient animal and keeping its skin is not perceived as an acceptable way of managing its death. In both cases, the authors describe their shock and frustration of being dependent on adults' understanding of their pet as 'only' an animal, and the dismissal of their emotional relationship with the pet.

The reason for their emotions can be associated to the blurring of the animal category: pets are not considered animals that can be killed without a reason, especially not for human consumption (Leach, 1964). The narratives, however, illustrate intergenerational differences in the interpretations of the acceptability of killing animals. What has been presented as a justified killing by adults, may have been experienced as unjustified by children – even as adults, at the time of writing the narratives. By transgressing the categorical boundary that defines pets as companions and family members, the pet has been 'made killable' by the adults, in the sense that they have not needed to justify its killing (Haraway, 2008, p. 78–80). For the authors, however, the boundary could not be transgressed. The emotions evoked by this controversy are expressed strongly in the narratives, suggesting that memories are, first of all, *emotionally felt* (Jones 2003).

There are also cases in which the death of a pet has been caused by an outsider, as in the following memory from the 1980s: "When the cat was about four years old I found her dead in the woods. Somebody had poisoned her. The grief was enormous and the cruel deed of the human was difficult to accept" (SKS KRA. Pets 629. 2015). Encountering death as an isolated experience causes not only shock and grief, but also contemplations of morality (Giddens, 1991, p. 144–180). In this case, such contemplations concern the place of animals in a just world. Often found in the narratives, they suggest that such experiences and the emotions they evoke have a profound meaning in childhood, one that is not easily forgotten.

According to Tipper (2011), children are conscious of intergenerational dynamics and power relations. The data used in this study support this notion. The authors of the narratives reveal a feeling of injustice regarding the ways in which adults have understood animal death and carried it out. Killing an animal without telling about it to the child becomes an ethical issue. The pain and bitterness expressed in the narratives suggest that the denial of communication and grief on the part of the adult is a central part of the memories created of the experiences. Also, the narratives reflect a generational change in the ways of relating to animals as companions. For the authors, expressing painful memories of lost pets is supported by

contemporary pet-keeping culture which increasingly allows the mourning of pets. Their parents' reactions, instead, indicate that such an openness in both human–animal relationships and adult–child relationships has previously been restricted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored childhood memories of experiences related to animal death in autobiographical narratives. The study suggests that the special meanings involved in relationships with animals in childhood are epitomized in the experiences of animal death. The memories analyzed illustrate the position of animals as friends and family members already in agrarian times, before pet-keeping became a central part of home and family. The narrators do not always make a clear difference in how they write about humans and animals: both are described as persons participating in relationships with (other) humans (Tipper 2011).

It seems that in childhood, the human–animal boundary does not appear as clear-cut but instead, mourning the death of an animal is comparable to mourning the death of a human. Children appear to have been willing to recognize their pets as conscious agents, often in situations where there are no adults present. Acknowledging animal agency at the moment of death, however, makes mourning the death more difficult (Redmalm 2015), also for children. Expressing emotions related to animal death have also been culturally forbidden, which is seen in parents' relative silence and the challenges faced in communicating the grief between parents and children. By emphasizing the human–animal boundary, adults seem to have 'lost sight' of their children and the agency they have displayed in their relations with animals. Recent changes in allowing the expression of emotions toward animals therefore also contribute to parent–child relations and to acknowledging children's own agency.

Jones (2003) notes that in memories of something permanently lost in childhood, mourning it easily becomes intertwined with the lost childhood itself. In remembering the deaths of close animals, the authors of the narratives may express feelings about their childhood more comprehensively, including parent–child relations and the general happiness or unhappiness that characterized their everyday life as a child. It is evident, however, that in the relational networks of childhood, animals and their lives and deaths are an inseparable part of everyday existence.

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