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The Pancake-Eating Pig and the Vegetable-Eating Cheetah: Three-Year-Old Children's Affective Perception and Care for Companion Species

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Abstract

As educators of early childhood teachers, we care about developing their values and attitudes, which will affect future generations of humans and other species whose lives depend on human compassion. As art and craft teachers, we recognize the importance of embodied experience, senses, and emotional engagement in teaching and learning. Seeking to flatten the established power differences between young and old, humans and nonhumans, aesthetic and scientific, in this article, we present what we learned about relationships between human and nonhuman animals from three-year-old children. The children's expressions about certain animals were initiated by adult animal drawings or emerged from their visual expressions. The expressions communicated new insights infused with care, empathy, compassion, pain, disgust, and horror. As a/r/tographers, we allow ourselves to be affected by the children's cries for inter-species solidarity and compassion. Through this study, we explore

what young children can teach their teachers, parents, and other adults about interspecies care.

The article employs an aesthetic, narrative approach to two recorded conversations that captured three-year-old children's new insights. In the first case, deep reflections emerge during a TV interview with a girl about pigs she met during a drawing project facilitated by the first author; the second case presents negotiations of meaning that took place during conversations between the second author and her son during their reading of picture books and drawing animals.

Introduction

Children's devotion to nonhuman animals seems undeniable; however, their "interest in other animals has often been seen as foolishness" by adults within Western societies (Waldau, 2013, p. 273). We, the authors, have been those children who engaged and made friendships with nonhuman animals. Today, as adults, teachers, and researchers, we still foster the same interests and desires to understand the capacities of human relationships with nonhuman animals. Young children have much to teach about interspecies care and compassion, which is critical to establishing a better ecological order on our planet (Bekoff, 2013), a key so desperately needed in times of massive animal species extinction and other ecological threats.

Two three-year-old children inspired us to write this article. The first was Marie, who, through the process of drawing a pig by observation, developed a deeper understanding of the pig, herself, and their relationship. The second was Veljko, whose engagement with animal drawings while reading a picture book with his mother led to new insights into the lives of the portrayed animals. After interacting with Marie and Veljko, we wondered: What new insights can emerge from three-year-old children's affective perception through encounters with nonhuman animals and their visual representations?

The two of us have learned from children before (see Fredriksen, 2011; Sarvanovic & Fredriksen, 2022). We sense that children's deep connections with other species can, among other things, teach us adults about the "open-mindedness needed for learning and unlearning regarding the nonhuman living beings in our larger community" (Waldau, 2013, p. 275). We are confident that children can challenge adults to reduce their human-centeredness and decolonize forms of "adult knowing." Children's aesthetic and poetic forms of relating to the world—as all children are born poets (Egan, 2002)—can help us to see reality with our hearts, react to it entirely and suitably (Fox & McLean, 2008), and allow ourselves to be touched by ecological injustice. Aesthetic approaches to animal subjects, such as through a process of drawing, can facilitate opportunities for *prolonged engagement*, which can lead to discoveries

of what was previously invisible (Bresler, 2006). We speak of *aesthetic* approaches and not *artistic* ones because we do not consider young children to be artists by profession; thus, children's aesthetic and emotionally loaded expressive processes can, in many ways, resemble qualities present in adults' *artistic* practices. The children's immersive engagements can, indeed, teach adults yet another aspect of the relationship between perception and affection.

As teacher educators working within the profession of early childhood education and care, we situate ourselves within the traditional settings of care studies; however, we seek to expand the conventional understanding of care as something adults *give* to young children. This expansion of understanding aims to destabilize the power differences between the traditional *givers* and *receivers* of care and place the concept of care into the hands of young humans. What can their care/affection/understanding of other species teach adults? This destabilization of power temporarily distributed among individuals (of different ages and species) leads us (authors) to understand that we (adult humans) are, indeed, those who need help to change our predetermined ways of thinking and living and deconstruct the socialized "wall between humans and all other species and the natural world" (Saari, 2020, p. 2).

Through this article, the two of us are seeking a movement toward "intergenerational and multispecies environmental justice in ecologically precarious times" (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019, p. 5). We believe such a movement can be initiated through multispecies encounters, care, and empathy. Our understanding of empathy is, as Van Dijke et al. (2020) suggest, "a continuous, dynamic process in which both empathizer and empathee are affectively involved and constantly influence and (re)shape each other's feelings and understandings" (p. 2). Understanding empathy as a two-way process urges us, as educators of early childhood teachers, to reflect deeply on which values we support, nourish, and seek to cultivate in new generations of humans, considering that supporting empathy in our students would lead to nourishing empathy in generations to come. A care ethic reveals the potential for education to foster citizens who care about one another enough to resist apathy created by the overwhelming global challenges, consider others' needs, and act on behalf of others (Rabin, 2019). Such education that fosters caring young citizens also seeks to empower them to act on behalf of others (in the case of this article, nonhuman animals).

Anthropocentric educational practices have more recently been challenged, and a "growing body of literature illustrates an ongoing commitment in environmental education to overturn humanistic paradigms and replace them with ecological, interspecies ones" (Oakley, 2019, p. 21). We hope that insights from this article can help educators and policymakers facilitate "the implementation of animal-inclusive pedagogies" (Saari, 2021, p. 3), promote education focused on enhancing interspecies sustainability (Saari, 2021), foster multispecies coexistence, and secure sustainable futures for all living beings.

Narrative, A/r/tographic Inquiry

As art teachers, we know how much education can learn from the arts (Eisner, 2002, 2004). Eliot Eisner (2002, 2004) proposed that teachers and students should be “improvisers capable of creative problem solving within personally meaningful learning experiences” (Irwin, 2013a, p. 138) in the way that the arts contribute to the creation of the mind (Eisner, 2002). For this study, we (the authors) engage in a/r/tography, which is a form of research within arts education and education in general, where educators, artists and researchers transform “the intention of theory and practice from stable abstract system to spaces of exchange, reflexivity, and relationality found in a continuous state of movement” (Irwin, 2013b, p. 199).

Our narrative embodied inquiry (Bresler, 2006), applied before and during the collaborative writing of this text, has implicated us as art teachers, early childhood teacher educators, and individuals who care for children and nonhuman animals. Our personal experiences, understandings, and values present before this collaborative writing certainly influence our reasoning and constructions of our narratives, our pieces of virtual reality, as Bresler (2006) puts it. Who we, Biljana and Ana, as individuals, professionally and privately, plays an essential role in our repetitive search for meaning in our research. Additionally, the process of listening to children’s voices, dwelling with their visual representations of nonhuman animals, and writing has challenged us to think thoughts we have not dared to think before, admit actions that we are ashamed of, and feel apologetic in the name of adults that are doing so much harm to nonhuman animals.

This text emerges when Ana’s son is three years and nine months old, and conversations about animals are a part of their daily life. Ana’s curiosity has the power to, as it has done before (see Sarvanovic & Fredriksen, 2022), remind Biljana of her similar conversations with other children. We combine personal experiences from different contexts through a reflexive process that undergoes a “continuous state of movement” (Irwin, 2013b, p. 199) between the two of us (a/r/tographers), the children, and a cow, three pigs, a cat, and a cheetah. Even though we cannot escape from our adult-anthropocentric position, we are trying to do justice to the children and the animals. Taking the liberty of speaking out for the children and the animals, we apologize if we unintentionally come to harm them.

In arts-based and practice-based inquiry, questions of ethics emerge constantly during the research process. The two of us also face the challenges of intersecting ethical requirements, i.e., research ethics are different from ethics of journalism. Marie was filmed by professionals employed by the Norwegian National Television (NRK), and her full name was displayed in the television interview. When Biljana interviewed Marie 15 years later, in 2020, she was 18 years old and gave her consent to be a part of this text. She was, indeed, rather proud of contributing with her full name; however, in this text, we only use her first name.

Regarding Ana's son, it is not possible to anonymize him. Notably, the relationship between a mother and her son provides access to their mutual affective perception. Ana's deep insights are possible because she knows Veljko as his mother. Soon to be four years old, Veljko spoke to Ana about his presence in this text, but he is still too young to fully understand the possible consequences of how he is represented here. In other contexts, researchers would ask a child's guardians for consent. In this case, Ana certainly takes every precaution to protect her son from harm.

More-than-human ethics also need to be considered. Such ethics deal with questions of nonhuman animals' rights, how they are represented here, and how the two of us treat them in our lives. In particular, we consider the individual animals who are our pets and companions, as well as those who are the source of our food. Ethics is also about being honest with the readers of this article and ourselves. Writing this text has been challenging because it made us discover our ignorance so that we no longer ignore uncomfortable thoughts and new insights that require us to change our habits, choices, and behavior.

Theory

Young Children's Care and Empathy in the Times of Ecological Challenges

It is commonly understood that young children need adult care; however, there are significant differences across cultures about what children of different ages need and which care is morally acceptable (Rogoff, 2003). Helping a child to eat or put clothes on is, for instance, a form of care for the child's well-being. However, practical forms of care can also deprive children of learning from their own experiences (Fredriksen, 2011). Similarly, adults should not steer children's hands to help them draw representations of animals but let them explore independently, creating space for negotiating their understanding of the world, materials, motor skills, and other crucial concepts that can only be learned through first-hand experiences. This article is written by early childhood art educators in two different geographical contexts, Norway and Serbia; however, we share a commitment that children should be given extensive opportunities to learn from their actions and embodied experiences in the presence of supportive, caring adults.

The *Nordic welfare model* is characterized by child-centeredness and includes "values such as children's care for each other, showing others compassion, sharing emotional intentions and giving comfort" (Einarsdottir et al., 2015, p. 99). These "others" that children should show compassion are identified as "other people within the community" or, more broadly, "among people" (Einarsdottir et al., 2015, p. 105). Similarly, in the Serbian context, in addition to supporting children's well-being, the National Preschool Curriculum Framework Years of Ascent (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, 2018) prescribes the

development of “altruism and humanistic characteristics such as affability, empathy, tolerance, generosity and solidarity for other people,” of which only one segment mentions the “development of *the sense of interconnectedness between people and nature and care for the environment* [emphasis added]” (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, 2018, p. 15).

The care ethic “is driven by societal concerns” (Leget et al., 2017, p. 5), and some of the most significant contemporary concerns relate to ecological crises. Humans are just starting to understand how interdependent all living beings, materials, and elements are and that “the livelihoods and fates of so many kinds and entities on our planet are unavoidably entangled” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 1). Harming nature, therefore, also means harming humans (Høyer & Næss, 2012). Caring for nonhuman species has become a necessity, and at the end of the day, it is also about caring for humans.

Caring for young individuals and preparing them for the future is what early childhood educators do. The forms of care the two of us address in this article are inter-generational, inter-species, and future-oriented. These forms extend beyond adults’ care for children and humans toward caring for individuals of different species, including those not yet born. Our approach to care, to some extent, overlaps with Brundtland’s definition of sustainable development, which is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987, p. 36). This definition emerged from the environmental challenges people recognized in 1987. Since then, human pressure on the Earth has been accelerating extensively, and we are now painfully aware of how our selfish hunger for “development” often causes animal suffering and threatens life on the planet in general. However, there is still hope; young children can show the rest of us a different path than economy-driven development, one where multispecies relationships are valued and appreciated. Along with Weil (2004) and Saari (2020), the two of us believe that education could “change the disastrous path we are on and help prevent future suffering” (Saari, 2020, p. 9).

Early in their lives, children develop “a core domain of knowledge about living things” (Waldau, 2013, p. 167). Children engage and value individuals (irrespective of the species) who are physically close, whether dogs or grandmothers. Children often sense connections between humans and other animals that derive from common ancestry, and they develop caring and loving relations with nonhuman animals (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019).

An understanding of empathy through posthumanist lenses, as Sinuefield-Kangas (2023) suggests, leads to a performative understanding of empathy where those involved in the process of empathy (be it through encounters with a picture book, a crayon, or an animal)

influence how empathetic behaviors unfold. Further, considering empathy to be a performative endeavor—something someone does and not something someone has—leads to acknowledging empathy’s role in generating understanding. Aesthetic perception during art-making or art-experiencing is connected to empathy (Sinquefield-Kangas, 2023). The performative processes can also lead to new insights, considering that “creating art is a system through which young people can map and question their knowledge while developing empathy” (Bradshaw, 2016, p. 117).

Children can understand and copy animals’ emotions and moods (Bone, 2013). How such copying unfolds has been recently explained by mirror neurons responsible for humans’ biological predispositions for empathy (Sinquefield-Kangas, 2023). Through empathy, a person can “not only understand, but...feel the other’s health, well-being or emotional state” (Collins & Collins, 2017, p. 112). Empathy makes it possible to perceive meanings behind the other individual’s actions and expressions (Bresler, 2006). A common understanding of empathy primarily recognizes empathy’s benefit to human-to-human relations (Sinquefield-Kangas, 2023) and not so much to human-to-nonhuman animal relations. However, it is through our human, living animal-bodies that we can understand other living beings (Vörös & Gaitsch, 2016, p. 102). Humans can recognize nonhuman animals’ emotions, because we know how it feels to be sad, scared, hungry, or happy. When a human is connected to others, the sorrow and joy of other individuals are experienced as one’s own, and the human can experience a deep need to help, support, and, in other ways, show care for the other. Further on, as Noddings (2010) notes, “When we attend and receive expressions of pain or need, we feel something akin to that pain (we empathize or sympathize), and then we experience motivational displacement; we are moved to help” (Noddings, 2010, p. 12). On the other hand, it is particularly through compassionate relationships and acts of caring that children’s sense of self develops and manifests (Myers, 2006).

Explorations of relationships between children and nonhuman animals require interdisciplinary approaches (Waldau, 2013). Early childhood education is interdisciplinary, and the arts are essential in children’s holistic learning. In the arts, senses and emotions are valued. As researchers interested in embodied, experiential learning, the two of us know that humans and other animals learn through their bodies, which is particularly evident when one observes young preverbal children and newborn individuals of other species, i.e., a newborn foal (Fredriksen, 2020). Corporeality and abilities embodied in more-than-human bodies facilitate opportunities for intersubjective communication, intuition, and *corporeal thinking* (Broglio, 2011). Moreover, thinking with other animals is possible through corporeal thinking that takes place “in the no-man’s-land between humans and animals” (Broglio, 2011, p. xviii). Such corporeal thinking, vivid and acknowledged in the arts, depends on each person’s past experiences, attention, emotions, senses, and embodied actions (Fredriksen, 2011). Holistic

learning (which includes corporeality) is a process of negotiation of personal understandings through continual giving and taking (Fredriksen, 2020). Whoever and whatever is present in the specific context—i.e., more-than-human individuals, books, available materials, and weather conditions—contributes to what the individual can understand and learn (Fredriksen, 2011). In Western education, learning is, on the contrary, frequently understood as an orderly linear process aiming at predefined goals (Snaza, 2013). However, most educators in early childhood education and the arts are aware that learning and teaching are complex, unpredictable, and even risky processes (Biesta, 2013); it is first when we (teachers) truly manage to set aside preconceived notions about what children are capable of and when we genuinely respect the uniqueness of each child's subjectivities, perspectives, emotions and expressions, that we can understand that each child's process of learning will unfold in unique ways (Eisner, 2002).

Empathic connections are essential in the arts, aesthetic, and qualitative research (Bresler, 2006) and in all forms of educational interactions. Our (Biljana's and Ana's) *empathic connection* (Clark, 2005) with Marie and Veljko made our mutual understanding possible. This kind of *receptive affective empathy* (van Dijke et al., 2020) allows caregivers to be care-receivers by being open, sensitive, and immersed in the other's experiences and inner worlds. However, as much as one connects with others, understanding another being is never entirely possible; this applies to both contexts where adults try to understand children and even more so when adults try to understand an individual of another species who differs from humans in ways a human cannot comprehend (Broglia, 2011). Still, similarities among animals are more extensive than humans used to believe, regarding, for instance, more-than-humans' abilities to encounter the world directly through senses (Abram, 2010, p. 5). If we, adults, consider young children's extensively embodied forms of relating to their environment, their extraordinary intersubjective capacities (Stern, 1985), and radiant imaginations (Egan, 2002), children might be better suited to empathically connect with nonhuman animals than adults.

Snaza (2013) claims that education is commonly understood as a process of humanization that leads toward the "development of human personality" (p. 39). Further, Snaza argues that education is also a process of dehumanization because the purpose of education (since Plato's Republic) has been to distance humans from animals. The idea of such distancing implies that young children are not fully human yet but rather similar to animals and, therefore, must be changed. The role of education has, indeed, been to lead children away from "animal desires" (Snaza, 2013, p. 48). However, perhaps what Western societies need today is to lead children away from the routine, stable, and predictable and instead encourage them to contend with the bewildering (Snaza, 2013). Unquestioned allegiance to Western notions of stages of development (Foucault, 1997) suggests that adults always know better than children. The two of us do not agree with such a view—we have experienced how much children can teach us.

Animals and children can, for instance, teach us how to be less human (Haraway, 1991/1986, as cited in Snaza, 2013) and how to let go of our stiffened assumptions of what it means to be human.

Children and Visual Representations (Children's Drawings and Reading of Picture Books)

Drawings are a form of representing something that does or does not exist in the real world. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1976) claimed that a child's drawing is both a sign of their cognitive development and a means of such development. Young children often draw from their imagination and memory; however, sometimes, when they draw what they observe, "their observation drawings differ from memory drawings in that they include greater detail, overlapping, unconventional orientations, and complexly contoured shapes" (Smith, 1983, p. 25). Disregarding whether the drawings are made from imagination or during observation, the process of drawing holds enormous potential for children's learning and their empathic connection with the subjects of their drawing.

Drawing demands time and attention for dwelling and slow learning (Clark, 2005). Children are seldom constrained by time in the ways adults are: They have plenty of opportunities for prolonged engagement (Bresler, 2006) with objects (or subjects) of their drawing interest. Prolonged engagement can facilitate deep mutual absorptions and merging of the drawer and their visual expression (Bresler, 2006), which, in the case of animal drawing, may encourage emotional, empathic connection between the child and the animal. Thus, both children's and adults' artistic engagements (such as drawing) with nonhuman species can support the development of their humbleness, awe, compassion, and respect for nature (Thorsnes & Fredriksen, 2023). Moreover, "artistic practices of [both] viewing and creating artwork are viewed as a possible means for fostering empathetic behaviors" (Sinquefield-Kangas, 2023, p. 2).

The face-to-face meeting between a child and an animal facilitates a "complex kind of seeing and feeling" and makes *affective perception* possible (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 159). The process of drawing demands focused attention to details, and the attention further urges the senses and imagination to fill in the gaps between what is possible to perceive and what is imagined. Furthermore, encounters with visual representations created by others, by artists or illustrators, "can encourage children to think deeply" and provide opportunities for children to "explore emotional relationships, including some of the big issues of life – love, divorce, death, violence, bullying, environmental issues and so on" (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 86). Picture books, for example, can offer "compelling drama for readers through the interaction of the visual and verbal narratives" (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 75). For young children who cannot read, the verbal narratives would be closely connected to their parents' voices and their own interpretations of the visual images.

In picture books, animals are often represented anthropomorphically, with human characteristics, and in ways that reflect and construct cultural values (Ganea et al., 2011, as cited in Bone, 2013, p. 58). Animals are often represented in ways that keep adults comfortable, and very few books “disturb the status quo” (Bone, 2013, p. 58) or challenge “the treatment of animals as an industrial product” (Bone, 2013, p. 59). However, more contemporary literature for children has many examples of critical approaches to human-centeredness. The way an illustrator of a picture book illustrates a narrative “may enrich and expand the potential for a posthuman reading” (Bjørlo, 2018, p. 186). A specific form of animal representation can, indeed, “direct readers to look upon animals from an ecocentric perspective, as beings with intrinsic value of their own, not as creatures inferior to humans” (Bjørlo, 2018, p. 176).

Animals as Individuals with Rights and Agency

Earlier, we mentioned the ongoing commitment among researchers to replace humanistic paradigms with interspecies ones (Oakley, 2019, p. 21), which can entail convincing humans that nonhuman animals are thinking and feeling beings, to counteract that “humanity has tended to deny or underestimate the mental life of animals” (Crist, 2013, p. 45). In anthropocentric thinking, assigning thinking and feeling to animals has been strongly rejected, ridiculed, and not taken seriously. For some researchers, the use of anthropomorphisms, that is: “ascribing consciousness or emotions to animals can mean the risk of career-death” (Castricano, 2008, p. 9). Considering that nonhuman animals have morality, ethical judgments, and creativity has been seen as childish and unserious. However, dismissing something as “childish” marginalizes children and nonhuman animals (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019), as well as playful and imaginative adults. It took a long time for scientific thought to move from the positivist understanding of animals as “moving machines” (Descartes, 1637) to the understanding that we have “at least one important similarity...: our shared capacity to suffer” (Francione, 2004, p. 22).

Studies from recent years have shown that animals and humans are more alike than different, and, as Bartowski (2008) notes: “kinship matters” (p. 19). “Posthuman theory addresses interspecies relatedness and explores the shifting boundaries between animals,” between nonhuman animals, humans, materials, and machines (Bone, 2013, p. 62). Considering that animals have agency is a powerful tool for decentering the human (Lloro-Bidart, 2014). Still, “our ethical judgments about how we should treat members of other species are strongly influenced by what we believe about their consciousness” (Griffin, 2001, p. ix), and these beliefs are not easily changed. Regarding animals “as merely existing and reacting” (Crist, 2013, p. 48), as driven by instincts, and generalizing about them as if every deer or a rabbit is the same prevents us from seeing them as unique individuals. Everyone who has had a cat or a dog knows that one specific individual is not simply replaceable by another. Each individual

has a unique personality¹ with their subjectivities, desires, emotions, and thoughts. However, “differences among individuals have often been viewed as a problem...rather than interesting and biologically meaningful information” (Baker, 2013, p. 159). If humans ignore variations among nonhuman individuals, we risk seeing them as merely natural processes and not for who they are, each with their unique personality (Baker, 2013).

Waldau (2013) defines human-centeredness as “a particular preoccupation of Western mainline ethics” (p. 261). Less anthropocentric forms of ethics exist side-by-side with the anthropocentric, such as in the Jains Indigenous culture, where children learn that all life is sacred. Starting their day with a commitment not to harm any living being foregrounds their ethical awareness (Waldau, 2013). Indigenous worldviews, generally, have questioned divisions between the animate and inanimate (Bone, 2013), and Indigenous forms of living often provide children with immediate contact with nature and nonhuman animals. In contrast, children living in urban Western societies learn about animals through books, digital media, and other second-hand experiences. In “modern” societies, children may learn through “social constructions and less-than-accurate generalizations about animals” (Waldau, 2013, p. 271). When human-centeredness is not questioned, children are less encouraged “to ask frank questions about the realities of the nonhuman living beings that share the Earth with our species. Such children are encouraged to ignore harms done to other animals subjected to domination and coercion” (Waldau, 2013, pp. 172–173).

The sensitive question of the hunger, pain, and suffering of the *Other* has long been viewed differently in scientific thought, whether it is the human-other or the nonhuman animal (Castricano, 2008, p. 9). For many thinkers, humans’ “superior” ability to reflect on their experiences was the reason for declaring humans as the only beings capable of suffering, thereby denying animals the right to suffer and feel pain. Following Descartes’s claim that animals feel pain but that pain is not morally relevant (Wolf, 2008, p. 137), the ontological difference between human and nonhuman animals has been maintained for a long time in Western thought. Learning to be human and different from animals means turning off emotions and “our perceptual apparatus such that we no longer see, or refuse to acknowledge, the animals’ pain and suffering” (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 165). As children have not yet gone through the processes of becoming adults and learning to repress the initial animality that lives in their hearts, imaginations, stomachs, and dreams, they have not “yet acquired the variety of distancing mechanisms humans use to separate themselves from other animals” (Steeves, 1999, p. 1). They see animals as thinking, feeling beings; “the young child’s self

¹ Expanding the definition of “person” that is traditionally interpreted in a narrow and exclusively anthropocentric way, David Sztybel (2008) claims that personal experience is sufficient for personhood: “We do not need rationality to have personal experiences, but we need to have personal experiences—be they cognitive or emotional—to continue to be a person” (p. 249).

includes the animal in the sense of caring for it, wanting to continue interacting with it, and finding similarities to it” (Myers, 2006, p. 7). Caring about someone makes this someone matter, as “the most important values are essentially relational” (Sobel, 2016, p. 1). For a young child, animals emerge as truly *subjective* others (Myers, 2006, p. 66).

Narratives and Interpretations

Marie and the Pig

The Context

In the Spring of 2005, I (Biljana) conducted a series of eight small projects with early childhood education students during their three weeks of practical training in early childhood settings in Southern Norway. The projects were not ambitious but fostered collaboration with eight local early childhood settings and the University of South-Eastern Norway, which had recently established a teacher education program inspired by Reggio Emilia pedagogy, world-famous for long-lasting arts-based projects in early childhood education. My motivation was driven by curiosity for children’s drawings: I wanted to see if, and how, the children would draw animals with whom they had the opportunity to touch, talk to and spend time with. In each of the eight one-day projects, children met representatives of nonhuman species: rabbits, goats, dogs, cats, horses, fishes, hens, or pigs. The encounters were planned and implemented based on the children’s interests prior to the projects, as well as the collective imagination and *didactical creativity* (Fredriksen, 2007) of university students, early childhood teachers, and myself. The project with pigs developed from the three-year-old children’s interest in the fairytale *The Pancake*, where a pancake runs away from humans and many animals, but a pig manages to trick it into his mouth.

On the project day, April 13, 2005, I visited a group of six 2- to 3-year-old children. They surrounded me and placed the book *The Pancake* on my lap, demanding that I read it, even though it was evident that they knew every detail of the book.



Figure 1. Reading the illustrated fairytale *The Pancake*, originally written/collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen

As we were reading the last pages of the book, where we could see a drawing of a large pig with a pancake on her nose, I posed questions about the pig's appetite for pancakes and wondered aloud how the pig managed to catch the pancake when no other animal could do so. We soon moved to the kitchen to continue discussing which pancakes the pigs may like eating. We made pancakes (with blueberry jam, tomato catchup, curry, and food coloring) and went to a pig farm to test them.

When we arrived at a small-scale pig farm, the farmer awaited us. He had built an outdoor enclosure and placed three approximately two-month-old pigs in it. I had prepared drawing easels with large sheets of paper and colored pencils close to the pig's enclosures. The adults at no point encouraged the children to draw. Their choices (whether to draw pigs, something else, or nothing at all) could provide insight into their experiences of the event.

All six children drew pigs, and some of them also drew pancakes. The fact that the easels with paper and pencils were placed close to the pigs' enclosure seemed to have a significant influence on their drawings. Marie's easel was a few meters away from the enclosure. She ran to the enclosure to get a better look and then ran back to her easel, yelling "pig's tail, pig's tail" or "pig's nose, pig's nose" as if she did not want to forget what the tail or the nose looked like before drawing them on the paper. The process of drawing seemed to require her attention to the lines and shapes she was making, but at the same time, it made her revisit the animals and observe them more closely. The drawing below shows a pig and a pancake (to the right)

with an extensive number of legs, which is not unusual when children are still learning to count: one, two...many.



Figure 2. Marie's drawing of the pig she observed.

Two Interviews with Marie

On the day the children met the pigs, the local newspapers were informed. However, instead of a newspaper journalist, a television crew arrived and aired a report on national television that same evening. Additionally, the reporters invited three-year-old Marie to the television studio for an interview. Although unexpected, the interview enabled me to access Marie's experiences and reasoning about the event, and the video recording made it possible to review her insights many times. Below is a translation of the interview:

The interviewer: *Marie, why did you give the pigs the pancakes?*

Marie: *Because we wanted to see if what we read in the book was true.*

The interviewer: *And, was it true?*

Marie: *Hm, yes, but just...the small pigs did not want to eat...but the big pigs...*

The interviewer: *The big pigs liked the pancakes, but the small pigs did not?*

Marie: (Shakes her head "no")

The interviewer: *Why did not the small pigs like the pancakes? What do you think?*

Marie: *Because they were afraid.*

The interviewer: *What were they afraid of?*

Marie: *They were afraid of us.*

The interviewer: *Were you scary?*

Marie: (Shakes her head “no”) *But they thought that we were.*

The interviewer: *And you had made the pancakes yourself, and I hear that these were not some ordinary pancakes. What did you do with them?*

Marie: *We put some colors in the, so that they became* (shows with her hands, gesticulating) *green...And some different colors on them...*

The interviewer: *Did you taste them?*

Marie: (Shakes her head “no”)

The interviewer: *And what do you think about the pigs?*

Marie: *Nice*

Fifteen years later, on February 27, 2020, I met Marie again in the same kindergarten building we met when she was three. An early childhood teacher, who had also been present 15 years earlier, joined us for a short conversation about Marie’s present relations to animals. I asked her if she remembered the pigs. She did but was unsure if she remembered them directly or because her parents kept retelling her what happened in April 2005.

Marie spoke about her rabbits and 17-year-old cat, who have been a part of her family as far as she can remember. She addressed the cat as a genuine family member, an individual with her own personality and not submissive to people but fully capable of expressing her mysterious needs. At the same time, this cat was very caring: If someone were sad, she would comfort them by stroking her body into this person and jumping on their lap. The early childhood teacher was touched by the way Marie portrayed the cat and said, “Your description of your cat portrays her as truly empathetic! And you address each of your animals as persons, as unique individuals!”

Marie’s Affective Perception

During the initial interview, it is remarkable how much Marie managed to express verbally and how thoughtful she was about the pigs’ point of view despite being only three years old. When asked why the pigs did not want to eat the pancakes, she had an explanation related to her own embodied experiences. She had probably experienced that the desire for food is related to how one feels. She understood the other living beings (the pigs) through her *living animal-body* (Vörös & Gaitsch, 2016), and she connected to them through *corporeal thinking* (Broglio, 2011). Marie is affectively attuned to the pigs, imaginatively comparing the pigs’ feelings with her own (Myers, 2006). Through her empathy, she cared for the pigs’ well-being and tried to connect to the pigs’ emotional states (Collins & Collins, 2017).

When she was further asked what the pigs were afraid of, she suggested they were afraid of

the children or all of us who visited them that day. However, when asked if the children were frightening, Marie was clear that they were not but that the pigs thought they were. Marie showed an ability to change perspectives, to see from the pigs' point of view, and to accept that what other individuals might think and feel can be different from what she experiences about the same matter. She showed respect for the pigs' fear, even though they, in her opinion, had no reason to fear the children. She sensed the pigs' fear through her affective perception, acknowledged that the pigs' perspectives were different from her own, and with no intention to persuade them, she treated them ethically and respectfully. Her affective perception led her to the ethical treatment of nonhuman animals (Fox & McLean, 2008).

While listening to Marie's voice repeatedly, I felt ashamed that I did not realize the pigs were scared. How must it have felt for them to be taken away from their safe indoor environment and be placed under the open sky, between running children, adults with strange equipment, cars passing on the road close by, and birds flying over their heads? From our (human) point of view, one might suggest that this could have been fun for them, but how much do we know about what is fun for pigs, or if they appreciate fun at all? Broglio (2011) claims that humans probably cannot understand individuals of another species; however, there is no doubt that emotions were shared intersubjectively between Marie and the pigs. Could her aesthetic attention and prolonged engagement during the process of drawing have contributed to this? The farmer invested as much effort into building the enclosure for the pigs and preparing the conditions for the children's meeting with them as he could. I am sure he considered the pigs, too, but the young humans were the primary focus that day; they were the main actors, and the pigs seemed to function as live utensils. This was subtly noticeable in the television report, where viewers were invited to laugh about the entire event. Looking retrospectively at my attitude 18 years ago, I am embarrassed that I did not consider the pigs' agency, not to mention what I still am not able to think of: These three individuals who were obliged to entertain us on April 13, 2005, might have been eaten by myself by the end of 2005.

Nobody Can Eat a Dear

The Context and Conversation

As Veljko's parents, we have included reading bedtime picture books in our daily family routine since he was two. As I (Ana) read the text aloud, Veljko immerses himself in the images, sometimes aligning his exploration with the accompanying text and sometimes constructing his own narratives from the pictures. Considering he is still too young to read letters, his relationship with stories and reading relies on illustrations. There are picture books that we have read countless times, yet he always demands to have them reread to him. If he is familiar with a book, he will attempt to read it independently through the visuals. In such cases, illustrations act as his prompts, guiding him back into the narrative and helping him

recall the story as we read it. He memorizes stories through the images and, with unwavering precision, identifies where we paused in the story and which segments we have not yet explored. He has specific preferences for certain illustrations, often influencing his choice of what to read first from the books we borrow from the local library.

Although he is highly attentive when listening to stories and can remember entire parts of the narrative, some illustrations and images captivate him more than the text. In a story detailing the journey of milk to stores (Deutsch, 2019), Veljko would consistently stare at one of the many illustrations on that page. At each reading, he would return to the illustrated cow, with a mechanical milking instrument attached to her udder, and say sadly that he did not want that done to the cow because it was hurting her. The cow's body is only partially depicted, with its face left unseen, and the accompanying text explains that the mechanism simulates calf suckling, which relaxes the cow and enables her to release milk from her udder. Despite the absence of any mention in the text that the cow experiences suffering or discomfort during this process, Veljko held his interpretation of the illustration, reading into it the cow's pain. Even the image of a smiling man attaching a cup to the cow's udder failed to convince or reassure Veljko that mechanical milking was a pleasant experience for the cow. The story intended to illustrate how milk makes its way into refrigerators (a process often overlooked in today's world where many simply buy a carton of milk) took on an entirely new focus through Veljko's reading. Despite the apparent visual objectification of the cow, his concern raised a crucial question about the suffering of animals in industrialized food production.

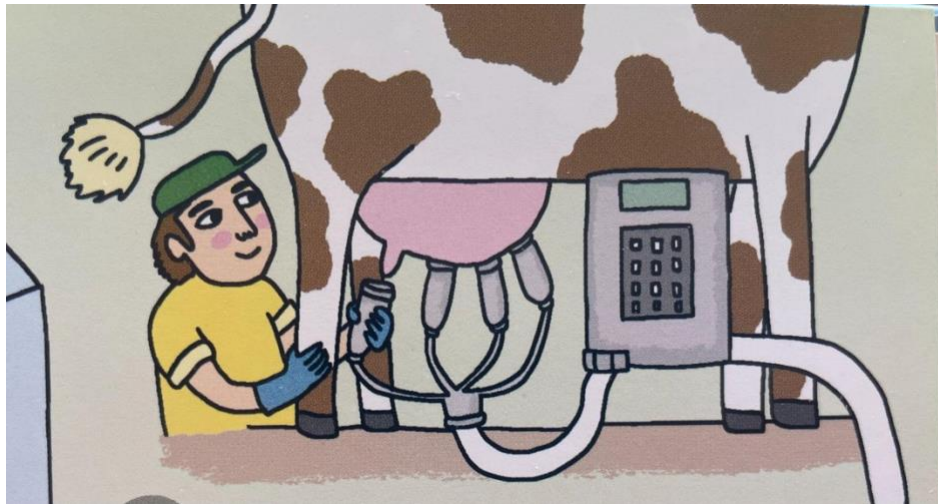


Figure 3. Illustration number 3 in “From cow to carton: The journey of milk” chapter (Deutsch, 2019, p. 47).

In another story, which delved into the tracing of wastewater after flushing the toilet (Deutsch, 2019), Veljko's attention was not on the narrative but on a rather unexpected aspect. At the place where the water returns to nature after purification, an illustration showed a father and a daughter fishing in the lake (which likely serves to illustrate that water from sewage systems undergoes such extensive purification that it can safely rejoin the natural environment). Veljko immediately stopped my reading and asked me why the girl and her dad were fishing for actual fish. Without waiting for my answer, he concluded that the illustration was incorrect because the fish we eat are not real but "fish meat." Even though he has eaten fish, he could not make the connection that the fish people eat were once real, live animals. Not only did his comment divert my attention from the story, but it was also the first moment I realized that my son still did not know that our meat comes from animals. Also, this illustration of fishing opened a whole new chapter in our bedtime conversations: Catching prey as a theme led us to the story of cheetahs and their prey. The following is a transcription of a recorded conversation between Veljko and me about our experiences reading picture books and the thought-provoking questions they raised.

Me: *And what is a cheetah's prey?*

Veljko (raises his voice in surprise): *Lions have prey; I forgot about that!*

Me: *And what is their prey?*

Veljko (voice reaches its peak, "Eureka"): *Mom, you know what prey is? It's food!!!*

Me: *Yes...they have to catch prey when they are hungry. And what can be a prey?*

Veljko: *An apple, a pear, a plum, fruit, and...lunch, breakfast...*

Me: *Will the cheetah actually eat the fruit...or will it eat some other animal?*

Veljko (continues suggesting fruits and vegetables he can remember as if he had not heard my question): *"Tangerines, vegetables..."*

Me: *Tell me, will a cheetah or a lion, when he is very hungry, eat just one plum?*

Veljko: *No...a plum, an apple, a pear, a banana, an apple, a plum, a pear, a banana.*

Me: *But that wouldn't be enough for them. They can't get enough of it.*

Veljko: *Why?*

Me: *They have to catch prey to eat. Some other animal...For example, (I pause for a long moment until I realize which animal I will propose) a deer.*

Veljko (sounds very surprised): *What? A deer?!*

Me: *Yes.*

Veljko (changes his tone and talks with a very sad voice): *But a deer is not a meal...*

Me: *But?*

Veljko: *But a deer that is alive and can walk! But there are no deer to be eaten.*

Me: *So, what will the lion eat?*

Veljko: *A pig, a pig is for eating! And a real pig is not for eating! And fish can be eaten, salty meat can be eaten, and cabbage salad can be eaten and anything you want.*

Me: *But wait, how do we eat a pig? Which pig are we eating?*

Veljko: *From meat.*

Me: *So, is that a real pig?*

Veljko: *No! Pig meat! And the fish? Fish meat.*

Veljko often pretends to be different animals. He is often a dog that walks around the house on four limbs. He loves being a cuddly kitty, and most of all, he likes to pretend that he is a mysterious egg from which something new will be born. The last time I asked him what he would be when he grew up, Veljko briefly said: “A bird.” Because of his sensitivity toward animals, I was afraid to reveal the truth to him at that moment. Instead of disclosure, many questions filled my mind, which continue to surface as I write about it with Biljana.

I can still recall the sadness I felt when I realized for the first time in my life that animals eat each other. Depending on how an animal was portrayed in books or other media, there were times when I felt sorrow for the antelope that the lion would eat. Other times, I worried about the starving lion on the brink of existence. It often felt like I had to decide who to empathize with more. Through picture books, movies, cartoons, and other media, we become connected to a particular animal, experiencing everything that happens to it; however, we often remain blind to the broader picture, the one that concerns the life cycle, food chain, and survival of life on Earth. What often becomes accessible and visible to us is that the lion is hungry and must catch his prey. However, we often do not see that this very lion will die and become food for many, i.e., parasites, bacteria, vultures, and plants. Such broader thinking has become even more crucial to me now that I am a mother with environmental and ecological awareness. This perspective often guides me when selecting picture books and during conversations with Veljko. When I choose books for my son, many belong to *children’s environmental literature*, which aims “to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow by positioning readers as ecocitizens” (Massey & Bradford, 2011, p. 109). As an art educator, excellent and intriguing illustrations are always one of the main parameters when choosing books.

Animal Suffering Seen From Veljko’s Perspective

The fact that animals suffer can become apparent to children through book illustrations. The represented animal is not just any animal but becomes familiar, allowing the child to identify with them and establish a relationship. This identification fosters empathy as “literature may sustain...human-centered understanding of nature, or challenge and influence it in the

direction of a more holistic view on life, valuing animals, plants and humans equally” (Mortensen, 2013, p. 285).

Affectively perceiving the illustration, looking with emotions as “modes of vision, of recognition” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 79), Veljko imagined the cow’s suffering. Veljko recognized the cruel act not only with his reasoning mind but also through his “awareness based on emotional discernment” (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 164). He was “seeing a reality with [his] heart and reacting to it completely and suitably” and “taking in what...was there with some combination of compassion, love, sympathy, tenderness and empathy” (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 164). Veljko’s perception of the cow’s pain and suffering is guided by emotional reactions at the center of his experience and is, therefore, of profound moral importance.

Veljko’s highly emotional reactions were an immediate response to the visual interpretations of what was happening with the cow. He did not accept the author’s written explanations that the cow enjoyed the machine. It became clear to me that since my childhood, I have gone through a whole path: from similar affective perception and empathy towards nonhuman animals in my childhood through learned anthropocentric mechanisms during my adolescence through a “speciesist socialization process” (Saari, 2020, p. 4), to returning to these critical questions through my work as an adult. However, my position is quite intellectual today, unlike my son’s, which is remarkably emotional. Although I am aware I was socialized into anthropocentric notions of viewing the world, a paradigm I wish to subvert, I still seem to suppress that wonderful ability of “seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there with imagination and feeling” (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 159), which is the affective perception children have readily available and will share if they are asked.

Discussion

Initially, we posed the question: What new insights can emerge from three-year-old children’s affective perception through encounters with nonhuman animals and their visual representations? The insights we address here are those of the children and our own. Through this study, we came to understand the relationship between the children’s engagement with visual representations of animals and their care for them. Further, our new insights can teach us about children’s relations to nonhuman animals and remind us of the complex connections within our ecological systems. This section of the text will be structured by the following three themes:

- the significance of an individual’s unique subjectivities – animals as subjects,
- the significance of the aesthetic approach to individual others, and

- children's moral reasoning and ecologically holistic perspectives.

The Significance of an Individual's Unique Subjectivities – Animals as Subjects

The taxonomy of learning to treat others with respect and care does not start with humans and then expand to other species; caring for others starts from caring for those who are physically close “because our true moral circle is, first and foremost, local” (Waldau, 2013, p. 278). For example, Marie and Veljko show us that closeness can be established with live animals and with drawings or illustrations that represent them.

The Norwegian kindergarten children, Marie's companions, had been reading the same picture book repeatedly and got to know the animals from the illustrations. The book did not contain significant written descriptions of the pig who caught the pancake; however, the illustrator of the book created their interpretation of the pig's looks. Marie had noticed details about the pig's appearance in the illustration. When we arrived at the farm, the small pigs did not want to eat the pancake; their refusal was quickly related to a mismatch between them and the pig in the book. The children believed they were trying to feed the wrong pig.

When Marie expressed her empathy for the small pigs, she intuitively connected to them. She expressed her thoughts in the interview: Nobody mentioned the pigs' emotions during the farm visit. Such perception of each other's emotions and thoughts is possible through *vitality affects*, which are patterns of arousal displayed through qualities of motions and voice in humans and other animals (Myers, 2006).² “Perception of vitality affects has roots in early infancy and is critical in human emotional communication” (Myers, 2006, p. 74); however, nonhuman animals are also capable of reading vitality affects in humans, as Marie's cat seems capable. Affective attuning goes both ways: A child can attune to a pig or a cat, and a pig or a cat can attune to the child (Myers, 2006, p. 93), and this, of course, happens between specific individuals, and not between generalized abstractions of species.

The way Marie perceived the pigs as individuals with their fears and preferences, even empathy, witnesses her genuine acknowledgment of them as unique individuals. Some argue that acknowledging animal agency is sentimental, “scientifically naïve, folk psychology, or wishful thinking” (Crist, 2013, p. 57), something only children do. However, in Marie's case, such an affective perception of individuals of different species has remained throughout her life. If her ability to respect nonhuman animals on a personal level was deemed immature (Crist, 2013), then we suggest that immaturity should be celebrated because it seems to be a force against distancing oneself from the animal world.

² With reference to Daniel Stern (1985)

In Veljko's case, he deeply engaged with a specific cow in one of his books. He imagined the cow was in pain and was concerned for the cow's well-being. He had placed himself in her shoes (or hooves) and developed compassion for her (Caine, 2009). The cow's pain was his own. When he experienced the cow as a person, a subject, her emotions, thoughts, and actions could remind him of his own. Then, it became possible for him to feel compassion for her and to care for her well-being. On the other hand, "if animal subjects are only abstract to us, they become replaceable, ethically non-existent, and their well-being is indifferent to us" (Vetlesen, 2015, p. 42); only "when a cow is just a cow, McDonald's becomes possible" (Steeves, 1999, p. 2).

For young children, an animal has not yet become *just an animal*; the animal is *somebody* (Myers, 1998). That could be why it was so difficult for Veljko to accept that *somebody* is for eating. Insights into Veljko's thinking process show us that animals are not strangers but beings who are inside their "empathic circle" (Noddings, 2010, p. 10) and, therefore, as morally important as humans (Fox & McLean, 2008). Perhaps this empathic circle is not defined by physical distance or gene similarity (Noddings, 2010) but by considering animals as unique individuals with their own ideas and desires, pain and joy, and consequently equal to us (humans).

By playfully transforming into various animals, Veljko demonstrates that the boundaries between the three-year-old children and the animals are still blurred, as if it is evident to him that "the human body is an animal body, and animality is immanent to human life (and vice versa)" (Massumi, 2014, p. 93). The two of us cannot help but wonder when and why we, as humans, stop barking, meowing, and imagining that we were born as a lizard or a bird. When and why do our aging bodies "suppress their animality" (Steeves, 1999, p. 1), and when do we, adults, start being "mistaken into thinking that the more-than-human is outside, surrounding the human, in the environment" (Massumi, 2014, p. 93) and not a part of us? If we, adult humans, bear in mind that the difference between species is learned and constructed by language and other media, then the work of early childhood teacher educators becomes even more vital: Perhaps the greatest achievement of early childhood education is to keep those boundaries blurred.

The Significance of the Aesthetic Approach to Individual Others

Book illustrations of specific animals capture them on paper, and they can be admired as long as one wants without risking that they would run away. All details can be explored, and eye contact can be established. Getting to know someone on a personal level is time demanding; however, it is the time spent with someone that creates a sense of meaningfulness. Caring about someone makes them matter (Sobel, 2016). Young children often enjoy reading and viewing the same book repeatedly. They sometimes know the text and details of the

illustrations by heart, but they still demand that their parents reread the book. Children wish to stay with the subjects of their affection as long as possible. Time has different values for them than adults who often assign economic value to time and do not want to “waste” it. However, when we demand ourselves to stay with the phenomenon of interest longer than we thought was necessary, deeper meanings can emerge, writes Liora Bresler (2006), with reference to Armstrong’s (2000) intimate philosophy of art.

A process of drawing can facilitate prolonged engagements. Even if the products of drawing might be impossible for adults to grasp, they can still be valuable to the child who created them as drawings are “representations in a fuller sense, in that they record the child’s process of attention to objects and events” (Matthews, 1999, p. 21). Young children mainly draw who or what is meaningful to them. Drawing is a way of expressing their interests and discoveries, such as the body parts of the pig. Affection for the animal that has been drawn can be expressed through the richness of details and care for the accuracy of their representation. When each of the six children at the pig farm freely chose to draw the pigs, they silently expressed their interest in the pigs.

Veljko’s decision to depict a cheerful lion arose from the conversation about lions and cheetahs catching their prey. Although he requested to observe a photograph of a lion while painting, he did not pay much attention to the lion’s appearance. The lion in the photograph was captured in motion, in profile, with his powerful body in the wild. However, in Veljko’s painting, only the lion’s head was visible, closely resembling how he typically represents human faces. Starting from an emotional rather than a visual perspective, Veljko, through his artwork, demonstrates that the lion is significant to him and that it is important to him to portray the lion in the way he believes is right. While painting, he said: “This lion is good; he doesn’t eat other animals or children; the lion is joking. He just eats fake meat.” Indeed, the face of the lion resembles a human face and seems to have human characteristics, such as smiling when he is kind.



Figure 4. Veljko's (3 years and 11 months) painting of a lion.

In Marie's case, the process of drawing seemed to challenge her "empathic muscles," which could lead to developing her ability to care for other individuals (Tardif-Wiliams & Bosacki, 2017, p. 78). In Veljko's case, painting the lion seemed to be a way of comforting himself or convincing his mother that the lion would not eat anyone. However, both children paid attention to these other living beings, which, according to Waldau (2013), is an important endeavor. When other species are visible to children, they can no longer be ignored.

Children's Moral Reasoning and Ecologically Holistic Perspectives

The biophilia hypothesis asserts "that we are born with an innate attraction to other species because of our common ancestry" (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019, p. 3). Young children seem to know this intuitively. Children's strong reactions to animal suffering are related to the underlying structures of human embodiment and the ability to empathize (Myers, 2006).

Marie was concerned about whether the pigs were too scared to eat. However, this specific context did not address the fact that those pigs were doomed to end their lives in a slaughterhouse before they were one year old. None of us adults involved in the event in 2005 gave that fact any thought. I (Biljana) am ashamed of that fact today, nearly 20 years later.

"A growing body of research is showing that young children make their own moral decisions regarding animals," particularly related to their decisions to eat them or become vegetarians, whereas adults "show blurred moral boundaries about these issues" (Bone, 2013, p. 59). This

collaborative writing process has set in motion the re-evaluation of our diets. How can I (Biljana) still eat pig meat after what Marie taught me? Personal meetings with animal individuals can uncover each other's subjectivities so that we can meet each other as companions, as happened with Marie and the pig. On the other hand, searching for a wrapped piece of meat from a mass-meat production plant makes the pig quite invisible and de-personalized. Nevertheless, knowing the source of the meat should prompt humans to question their own needs in relation to the needs of nonhuman animals. The issue of guilt emerges. My (Ana's) son addressed the questions of animals as food, both wild animals eating each other, and that much of the food he eats is called the same as animals, i.e., chicken, fish, or pig. He has somehow concluded that adults make food with the same name as animals, but indeed, only the words are the same; the food has nothing to do with the live animals.

When I (Ana) was little, my grandfather used to annually slaughter the biggest pig on his farm, a tradition in his village. During that process, every part of the pig's body would be used, providing enough for an entire large family for the following year. My mother remembers from childhood that meat was too expensive for everyday consumption. Today, 60 years later, we live in abundance, where various meat products are available to many; we buy them in supermarkets, far away from animal farms, and we seldom pose questions about the lives of the animals that satisfy our (endless) hunger.

The more I reflect on those memories, the more I realize that my grandfather had a unique bond with his animals. Despite their eventual fate, all of us in the family could feel how much he loved and cared for them. His relationship with animals mirrors the Indigenous Apache people's connection with bison or salmon (Rawal, 2020) and the Sami people of North Europe, who believe in slaughtering reindeer with respect and gratitude to ensure every part has a purpose, avoiding waste (Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge, 2024). We can learn from Indigenous people, as well as from three-year-old children, that a different attitude towards nonhuman animals, one filled with care and empathy, can lead humans to consume less meat and become more interested in how that meat is produced.

Care for Companion Species as a Transformative Force

In Western education, where the position of human influence on the global ecological community is seldom questioned, certain forms of "unlearning" seem necessary. Today, "more than ever we need a sustainable ethics" (Oliver, 2010, p. 280), an ethics that obliges us to recognize that we are dependent on the Earth and its creatures. That type of unlearning "requires us to attend to our response-ability by virtue of that dependence" (Oliver, 2010, p. 280). Young children's compassion and care for nonhuman animals might help us make important life decisions, such as abstaining from eating certain foods because "shifting dietary

patterns away from meat and dairy-centric diets is key to environmental sustainability” (Oakley, 2019, p. 27).

Referring to school children, Noddings (2003) claimed that Western education has failed in terms of nourishing young children’s care for animals. In an ecological crisis, humans’ empathetic connection to animals is more than necessary to motivate them to take responsibility for the animal world in adulthood. Close contact with more-than-humans can expand the concept of an ecological community, which can bridge the gap between humans and the rest of nature (Høyer & Næss, 2012).

Industrial-scale animal farming, driven by excessive meat consumption, poses a grave threat to the global environment, consuming vast land resources, emitting high CO₂ levels (van Oort & Andrew, 2016), and having a colossal water footprint (Francione, 2004). With cattle meat and milk emissions surpassing potential alternatives and the biomass of food-production cattle exceeding the entire biomass of wild animals tenfold, adopting more sustainable options is ecologically responsible and crucial (Francione, 2004). Thus, adopting a higher level of ecological responsibility is difficult for an individual who is used to a comfortable lifestyle. For an ego-centric position, ecological responsibility appears as an unnecessary burden. “Dealing with the problem of future generations is one of the most impervious challenges of our time” (Pulcini, 2021, p. 121), particularly because of a lack of motivation to change the comfortable lifestyle one is living. This is called the “motivation problem” (Pulcini, 2021, p. 121). Encouraging compassion for nonhuman animals can serve as a powerful motivator for initiating lifestyle changes (Bekoff, 2013). Even better than changing lifestyles, we could allow young children’s compassion for animals to continue to grow so that their lifestyles remain as responsible as they have been at the beginning of their lives.

“Many of the environmental issues facing our societies involve balancing knowing and caring” (Myers et al., 2004, p. 545) and balancing knowledge and values. A child’s care, compassion, and love for one single animal should not be underestimated; Children’s commitment and care for individual animals can lead to environmental actions later in their lives (Myers et al., 2004). The good news is that there is no way back when one has sensed this kind of compassion, and when ecological awareness has been awakened (Morton, 2018). As Stake and Visse (2021) believe, “care for ecology begins with doing what we can in the microsphere of our lives” (p. 113). One can realize that something should be done but does not know how to care for the planet (Stake & Visse, 2021). We suggest starting with small tasks like caring for a single animal. Caring for more-than-humans can “foster a more just and equitable society” (Stake & Visse, 2021, p. xiv). The pedagogical advantage of becoming ecological is that such a process is not reversible: Once a person has acknowledged the

existence of beings that are not oneself, there is no way to “un-acknowledge” this (Morton, 2018, p. 128).

Acknowledging the biological continuity among species, as well as differences between them, humans can be characterized as “the species of an animal with the cerebral cortex of a god. Caught between divinity and animality, between what it is and what it might be, it is the child who mediates the human possibility” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 5). Indeed, young children can be “ambassadors for a more harmonious, peaceful, compassionate, and gentle world” (Bekoff, 2013, p. 384). We have so much to learn from them.

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