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## ARTICLE

# Using ethnomethodology as an approach to explore human–animal interaction

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## Abstract

Animal geographies is going through methodological change, moving towards a variety of methodological approaches that enliven inquiry into nonhuman animals' lives. Despite this move, there is still a clear need to develop approaches to explore human–animal interaction that centre animals in geographical inquiry. This paper aims to build on lively debates in animal geographies to offer ethnomethodology as one such approach. Ethnomethodology, an approach rather than a method, has had only brief engagement with human geography, but this paper will argue that ethnomethodology has various characteristics that align with traditional geographical enquiry and that can help grapple with the many ontological and epistemological challenges animal geographers face. These characteristics: an attention to place-based practices; a focus on agency and subjectivity; and an understanding of practices as a relational, offer points of interest for geography and ethnomethodology to converge. I expand on these facets and outline ethnomethodological engagement with animals before turning to my own example of human-assistance-dog training to illustrate how an ethnomethodological approach is useful to animal geographers. Overall, this paper suggests that ethnomethodology offers animal geographers: a focus on embodied senses; a concern with forms of agency and subjectivity within space and place; and a rich descriptive approach to practical detail. The paper concludes with a discussion towards geographical ethnomethodological futures.

## KEYWORDS

animal geographies, assistance dog, disability, ethnomethodology, video

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

It is not so much that we do not speak whale but, on our terms, there is no 'whale' to speak; an anthropomorphic hubris that has long since been shown to be falsely premised.

(Buller, 2015, p. 375)

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Methodological concern is rife within animal geographies. How to approach and undertake research into animals' geographies, to explore animals' lived and felt experiences, rather than their anthropocentric representation, is a question geographers are constantly grappling with (Buller, 2015; Gibbs, 2020). A plethora of methodological approaches have been developed to do just this, whether they focus on visual (Bear et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2021), mobile (Arathoon, 2021; Brown & Dilley, 2012), sensuous (Ellis, 2021) or affective (Sinha et al., 2021) ethnographies of human–animal interactions. These approaches all aim to do one thing: offer a less anthropocentric way to research animals' geographies.

One approach that has garnered less attention is ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology is not a method but, rather, is an approach to examining social practice. To examine social practices, ethnomethodologists deploy different skills to 'find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims ... that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine' (Sacks, 1984, p. 413). Drawing on methods such as video (and interviews and ethnography), ethnomethodologists explore the ethnomethods – gestures, intonations, pauses, hanging sentences, observable actions and behaviour – of its members.<sup>1</sup> These ethnomethods have overlapped with the ethnographic skills conducted by animal geographers in their move to study closely animals' lives. Furthermore, both ethnomethodology and animal geographies place emphasis on practices as relational doings.

The aim of this paper is to thus to examine ethnomethodology as one such approach to examining human–animal interaction that goes beyond anthropocentric interpretation. This aim is couched by three key questions: what can ethnomethodology offer to animal geographers? How can a focus on 'ethnomethods' help enliven animal geographies? How can an ethnomethodologically inspired video-ethnographic approach be used to investigate human–animal interaction?

I aim to answer these questions by exploring what ethnomethodology is and how geography as a discipline has engaged with ethnomethodology. This engagement, whilst limited in scope, is important in setting geographical ethnomethodological investigations apart from wider ethnomethodological studies. I then discuss what ethnomethodology can offer animal geographers, which, I argue, is: a focus on embodied senses; a concern with forms of agency and subjectivity within space and place; and a richly descriptive approach to practical detail.

To illustrate this, I draw on my research with Dog A.I.D. (Dog Assistance in Disability), an Assistance Dog UK (ADUK) charity that helps physically disabled and chronically ill people train their own pets to be assistance dogs. One aim of the research was to explore *how* physically disabled humans and their assistance dogs train together to form an assistance dog partnership. Here I apply an ethnomethodological approach through video and graphic transcripts to do just this, to show *how* ethnomethodology can be useful to animal geographers. Finally, I conclude by outlining what geographical ethnomethodological futures may look like.

## 2 | WHAT IS ETHNOMETHODOLOGY?

Despite having the word 'methodology' in its name, ethnomethodology is not a method, rather it is an approach to examining social practice. Ethnomethodologists have an interest in the doings of social practice, the *how* instead of the *why*. Established by Garfinkel, 'ethnomethodology's standing task is to examine social facts, just in every and any actual case asking for each thing, what makes it accountably just what that social fact is?' (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 251). The aim is thus to examine *naturally occurring* social phenomenon, asking 'the practical question par excellence ... what to do next' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 12). What to do next, is inclusive of any member, with members of settings never defined as solely human. In doing so, ethnomethodologists are interested in the observable nature of social practice, and how they can 'see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation' (Sacks, 1984, p. 413). In this sense ethnomethodologists are empirically guided to analyse members' methods.

Ethnomethodology is a form of intense empiricism, focused on what can be observed and understood, and rose through Garfinkel's reticence about theoretical sources and what some saw as the downplaying of methodological practices (Lynch, 1999). To examine social practices, ethnomethodologists deploy a number of different skills to 'find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims ... that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine' (Sacks, 1984, p. 413). Drawing on methods such as video and interviews, ethnomethodologists explore the ethnomethods – gestures, intonations, pauses, hanging sentences and observable actions – of its members. As Lynch (1993, p. 38) posits, 'ethnomethodology tries to reinvigorate the lifeless renderings produced by formal analysis by describing the 'life' from which they originate'.

However, there is hesitance towards ethnomethodology with several key critiques. The first is due to ethnomethodology's rise, its indifference towards theory and its challenge towards the position of sociology. Lynch (1999) argues that ethnomethodologists are reticent to share their theoretical sources and influences, often ignoring the influence of those

'outside' ethnomethodological interest. This is important, as I can see, throughout ethnomethodology's epistemology, influences from humanism and phenomenology (see Heritage & Maynard, 2022, for Husserl's and Schutz's influence on Garfinkel). Second, as highlighted by Lynch (1993), critiques were formed around ethnomethodology's focus on empirics: that it is *too* focused on method and was *too* occupied on inner meanings. Ethnomethodologists argue that there is a taken-for-granted nature around phenomena that often ignores how things are done and instead delineates this to abstract theory or rules. Instead, ethnomethodologists focus on the 'witnessable order' of action, that which is recognisable and accountable (Livingston, 2008, cited in Heritage & Maynard, 2022, p. 8). Indeed, a range of other critiques address issues such as judgements of adequacy, power and scale (Lynch, 1993).<sup>2</sup> I now turn to geographical engagements with ethnomethodology, charting how geographers have engaged with ethnomethodology, and examine the key skills ethnomethodologists can offer geographers and those investigating animals' geographies.

### 3 | ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

There has been limited engagement between geography and ethnomethodology, but as Laurier (2009, p. 636) states:

Human geography today has a still deeper affinity with the early and later concerns of ethnomethodology in its attendance to the conjointness of human practices and particular places. Moreover, they are both concerned with how it is that similar forms of agency or subjectivity or identity emerge differently in each and every place.

Place occupies an eminent position in cultural geography. Place at its simplest combines location with meaning (Cresswell, 2014; Tuan, 1977). But beyond this, place has a physical landscape and 'a sense of place' – referring to the meanings, both individual and shared, that are associated with a place – that is imbued with power relations (Massey, 1994). Ethnomethodology's focus on practices within place can help geographers examine how practices occur in different places, and how, at a theoretical level, meaning, and a sense of place, is co-produced.

Where geographical ethnomethodological work diverges from traditional ethnomethodological studies is through engagement with theory. Some ethnomethodologically inspired geographers have not taken the stringent approach to theory that other ethnomethodologists have. Laurier (2003) discusses some affinities between ethnomethodology and Actor Network Theory (ANT), whilst Laurier and Philo (2004) explore the interconnections between the historical archaeology of Michel Foucault and the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel. The most obvious link, though, is between ethnomethodology and non-representational theory (NRT). Thrift (1996, p. 18) discusses theories of practice and ethnomethodology's approach which 'shows the stuff of social order as people's familiar, everyday actions, arising out of the 'local logics' connected with concrete social situations'. Thrift links this to NRT's aim to explore practices as they occur, but there is no clear evidencing of ethnomethodological work in practice being completed by Thrift. In a clearer example, Loughenbury (2009) argues that potential interconnections between ethnomethodology and NRT reside at the intersection of embodiment, and this draws out the importance of agency, subjectivity and ethnomethods both as an engagement between these specific approaches but also between ethnomethodology and the wider field of geography.

Other geographical ethnomethodological work has been empirically focused, exploring embodied human–material interactions such as how passengers use a turnstile on a bus (Muñoz, 2020), the 'doing' of accessibility in public transport systems (Muñoz, 2021) and how walkers use digital maps to navigate (Smith et al., 2020). Moreover, work has centred human–human interactions such as people saying where they are during phone calls (Laurier, 2001), encounters in a café (Laurier & Philo, 2006) and everyday cycling navigation (Latham & Wood, 2015; Lloyd, 2020). These engagements between different actors (human and nonhuman), open the possibility to utilise a geographical ethnomethodological approach by specifically examining the ethnomethods at play within social interaction and practice. I now explore how ethnomethodology can be a useful tool in exploring human–animal interaction and animals' geographies.

### 4 | ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND ANIMALS

Animal geographers have pushed for new creative methods that take into consideration animals' geographies (Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2015), to 'hear the cry' of the nonhuman, rather than its anthropocentric interpretation (Buller, 2015; Gibbs, 2020). Animal geographers have sought to enliven their methodological approaches, utilising visual (Bear et al., 2017; Lorimer, 2010; Smith et al., 2021), mobile (Arathoon, 2021; Brown & Dilley, 2012), sensuous (Ellis, 2021) and affective (Sinha et al., 2021) ethnographies, ethology (Barua & Sinha, 2019; Lorimer, 2012) and multispecies

autoethnography (Gillespie, 2021). The aim of such mixed, but interconnected, methodological approaches is to gain an insight into animals' lifeworlds on their own terms; adopting animal sensibilities through movement, bodily attunement and to 'learn by witnessing' (Lorimer, 2012, p. 72) animals' lives.

To highlight how ethnomethodology can be helpful to animal geographers, I spotlight two key characteristics. First, ethnomethodology treats practices in general as observable and accountable. Through different, often ethnographic, approaches, ethnomethodologists examine the ethnomethods on display. These may be gestures, intonations, pauses, hanging sentences and observable actions of its members. In animal-focused ethnomethodology, the attention on what is observable has led to a focus on interactions as varied as the dance of honeybees (Crist, 2004) to primate social interaction (Mondada, 2018). But the most common human–animal interactions explored are those between humans and dogs (Laurier et al., 2006; Mondémé, 2020). Goode's (2007) work on play with his dog Katie has been significant. Goode (2007) sets out to explore what Garfinkel refers to as the 'lived orderliness' of play with his dog Katie through first-hand participant observation and video recording. Outlining the shared history between himself and Katie, as well as the game structures, Goode (2007, p. 65) shows how play:

Is 'orderly' in praxiological and historical ways described and shown by the data. Our playing is not random, it is methodical. Yet it is 'lived' in that playing must be made to happen, brought off, under just these conditions, just now, with just these players.

Play thus relies on learning each other's moves, responses and response to responses. Furthermore, play between Goode and Katie was based around trust that both players would conform to the 'normal' ways of play; in this sense, 'play consisted of an observable moral and praxiological orderliness' (p. 66). Through this first-hand observability and detail, human–dog interaction is shown as a form of mutual work. In this sense, ethnomethodological investigations into human–animal practices can help animal geographers analyse practice as it occurs in situ.

A second similarity between geography and ethnomethodology is the importance of agency and subjectivity. Ethnomethodology centres all actors (human and nonhuman) within social practice, emphasising a concern with subjectivity and agency within space and place, making it a suitable counterpart to the methods outlined above. Theoretical approaches that have more commonly been adopted by animal geographers such as ANT (Bear & Eden, 2008), assemblage theory (Gibbs et al., 2015; Gorman, 2017) and NRT (Lorimer, 2012), have infused animal geographies with relationality and liveliness (albeit to differing extents). Animals are not empty vessels of human control but are agents of social practice. Bringing together geography and ethnomethodology's place-based concern with the above foci on what is observable and relationally made through ethnomethods, Laurier et al. (2006) explore dog walking in a Swedish park to reflect on debates about animal agency in human–animal activities. Accepting the positive possibilities of anthropomorphism, Laurier et al. (2006) detail human–canine action as it occurs in the spatially situated activity of dog walking in parks, shifting from the mind in mental and cognitive terms, to the production and recognition of intelligible action through actual methods, techniques, devices and practices involving humans and dogs. This work shows specifically the value of an ethnomethodological approach to the study of animals: that ethnomethodology, along with video and other ethnographic methods, can help focus on the observable embodied interactions between humans and animals and can show a deeper understanding of *how* social practice is accomplished in-situ.

This is tied more directly to animal geography's new methodological directions, to adopt sensuous, observational and immersive approaches towards animal sensibilities (Ellis, 2021). There is, however, a distinction between an ethnomethodological approach and some methods being championed by geographers. For example, the focus on agency versus behaviour creates a clash between ethnomethodology and ethology. Ethnomethodology advocates for a move away from cognitive theories of the mind, instead describing how things are accomplished without presuming prior decision-making based on behaviour. That is, in our noticing, we do not ascribe particular actions to an innate behaviour, but rather, the focus on embodied non-verbal actions helps challenge assumptions around the limited capacities of animals that are not the case in practice. Furthermore, as ethnomethodology is not a method but an approach, it has the potential to draw on other video and ethnographic approaches, and with them, attendant ethical challenges. For example, it should be recognised that methods are deeply political (Rubio-Ramon & Srinivasan, 2022), and ethnomethodology's tendency towards what is observable can overlook broader structural factors of social practice. In addition, the focus on examining naturally occurring social phenomena gives an impression of a researcher removed from impacting the data collection, which is impossible. However, in placing animals as 'members', ethnomethodology challenges institutional ethics systems which have ignored nonhumans (Oliver, 2021), placing them as worthy of ethical consideration beyond the binary of harm and benefit.

## 5 | ANALYSIS: TRAINING A DOG TO PICK UP A WALLET

To illustrate ethnomethodology's usefulness to animal geographers, I draw on a project with Dog A.I.D., a charity that helps physically disabled and chronically ill people train their own pets to be assistance dogs. One aim of the research was to explore *how* physically disabled humans and their assistance dogs train together to form an assistance dog partnership. In my research I utilised an ethnomethodological approach, using observation and video recording, to explore this question. Below, I offer just one insight into this ethnomethodological practice through exploring *how* June and Quake train together to pick up an item. Here I emphasise that my aim is to show what ethnomethodology can offer animal geographers, in this example through embodied characteristics, relationality and a descriptive approach to practices, that show how in detail human and dog accomplish actions together.

Figure 1 shows an example of Quake picking up a dropped wallet for June. In the video clip (Panel 1) of the training exercise, the start of the 'pick up' task is indicated by June wheeling backwards from the table and turning to face Quake. As June moves backwards, eye contact between herself and Quake is maintained. June then drops the wallet and as she does so Quake watches June's hand, and the wallet drop to the floor. Quake begins to move towards the wallet before June gives the cue (Panel 2). Quake's action in moving forward before the cue is given indicates her prior knowledge in recognising that June is inviting her to pick up the wallet. For June, Quake's anticipation indicates their co-learning of tasks and their development as a team. Furthermore, the drop of the wallet, eye contact, and verbal cue all act as an invitation for Quake to pick the wallet up (Laurier et al., 2006).

When the verbal cue is offered (Panels 2 and 3), June's hand is in position to receive the wallet from Quake, acting as a gesture and reaffirming the 'pass it' cue. When Quake walks over to the wallet, her tail wags slightly as she first begins to move the wallet with her nose. In Panel 4 June's repetition of the cue, 'can you pass it?' and hand placement is a response to Quake's actions in moving the wallet with her nose. On the repeat of the cue, Quake paws at the wallet twice, moving it away from June (Panel 5). In pawing the wallet Quake is trying to manoeuvre the wallet to get a grip on it. June is quick to praise Quake for the action (Panel 6). The praise here, acts as a verbal caress (Pemberton, 2019), affirmation and a prompt to continue the task. The praise is encouraging and relies on June's sense of what Quake can hear and understand. 'Good girl' and 'mummy' act as verbal utterances of learned words.

With this praise, Quake picks up the wallet in her mouth. There is a certain kind of handling involved with the picking up of an item, different to that of a ball, chewable or rope; there is a carefulness as Quake does not apply pressure to her grip on the wallet. In one motion flicking her head forward, Quake attempts to put the wallet in June's hand. In doing so the wallet falls to the floor (Panel 8), but part remains sticking upwards providing an easier point for Quake to grasp in her mouth. As Quake is reaching for the wallet again, June says 'that's it, in my hand' (Panels 8 and 9), holding her palm out flat, and providing further direction for Quake. At the second attempt Quake manages to lift the wallet by the flap and place it in June's hand. As June receives the wallet, she begins praising Quake saying 'thank you' in an extended high-pitched voice (Panel 10). As June is saying thank you, she turns to grab Quake's reward off the table (Panel 11). When June is completing this praise and movement, Quake's eyes are monitoring June's reaching hand. This indicates Quake's anticipation of a reward which comes in Panel 12 as June gives Quake 'squirty cheese' and praises her further, saying 'good girl'. The reward and verbal praise function as a spatio-temporal event where the act of rewarding is placed on the human and is timed to provide reinforcement for the completed behaviour (Laurier et al., 2006; Mondémé, 2020). The expectation of a reward by Quake shows the embedded routine in training of request/action/reward.

This training encounter combines sensuous, embodied engagement between human, animal and material. The interaction between June and Quake shows a cross-species encounter and a strengthening of the task, 'picking up items', which they had already begun to learn together. The strengthening of this task comes through repetition and continuous engagement in the task in different spatial contexts. The task comprises a group of training actions where human and dog must learn to respond to one another. The talk, emphasised here as a 'polite' request, differs from other dog training (see Smith et al., 2021). However, despite the interaction following the sequence request, action, reward, there is a slight mismatch between the audible request and the gestural component, as Quake anticipates what June will ask.

These actions and responses, presented here sequentially, can be seen through the clear verbal expressions and physical components of the human and animal bodies involved, along with more subtle intricacies such as visual monitoring between June and Quake. The interspecies intercorporeality throughout the training encounter forms June and Quake's cross-species communication as they read one another's body language and hence co-operate to complete the task (Despret, 2004; Haraway, 2003, 2008). In this example, through an ethnomethodological approach, I have focused on both the mechanical and lively nature of social practice. I argue that focusing on the mechanics and liveliness of the interaction – the *how* of social practice – centres both human and animal and more fully moves towards understanding shared lifeworlds.

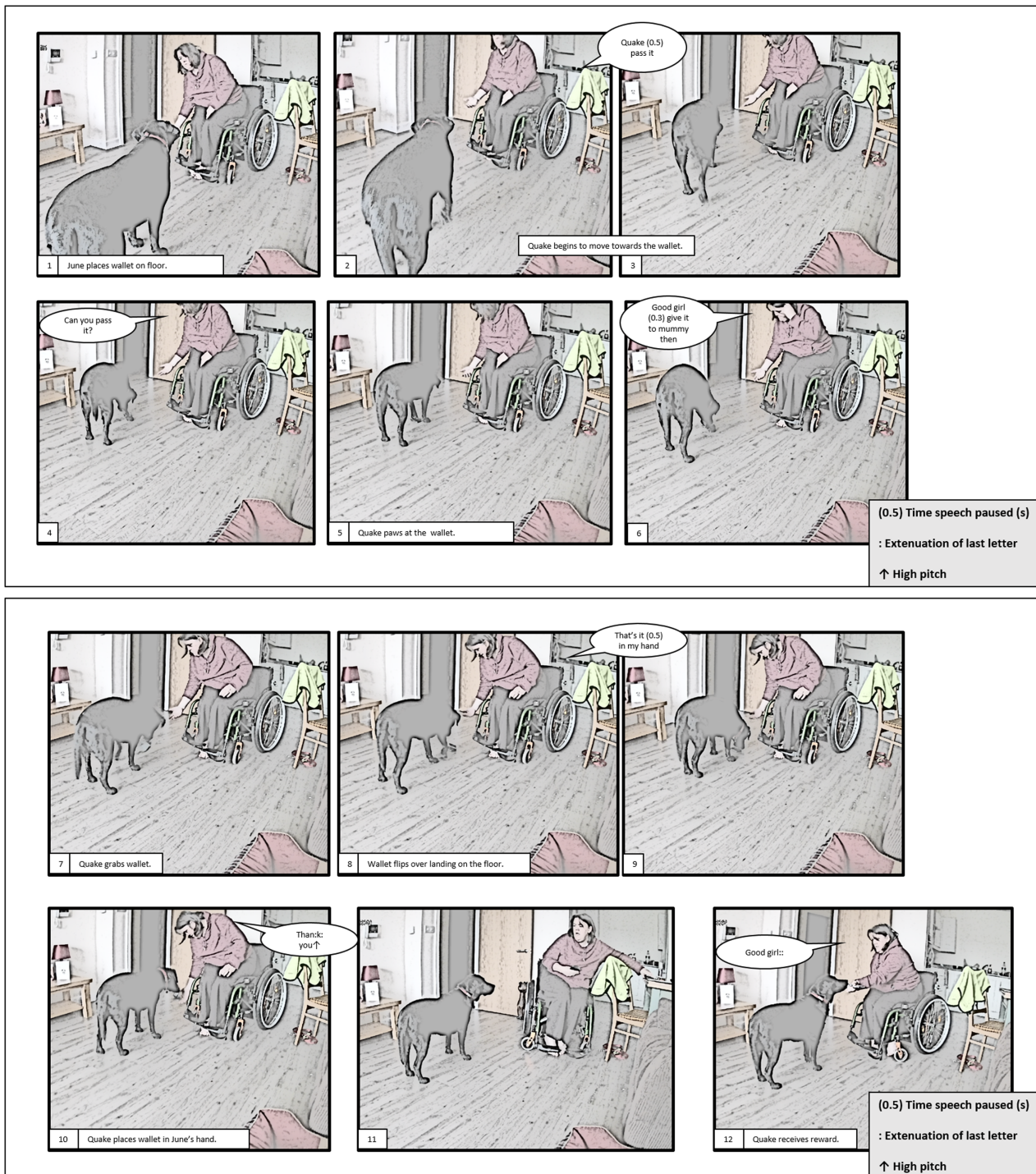


FIGURE 1 Picking up a dropped item.

## 6 | CONCLUSION: FOR GEOGRAPHICAL ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL FUTURES

The aim of this paper has been to examine the ways in which ethnomethodology is a helpful approach to examining human–animal interactions that go beyond anthropocentric interpretation. I argued that ethnomethodology enlivens animals' geographies and the role animals play in social practice through a focus on embodied senses, relationality, concern with forms of agency and subjectivity within space and place, as well as ethnomethodology's richly descriptive approach to practical detail. This was demonstrated through empirical examples on assistance animal training, illustrating both a human's and an animal's roles in assistance dog training. The graphic transcripts and analysis highlight

human-assistance-dog training as a process of becoming (Haraway, 2003, 2008), an affective, embodied and sensuous multi-species pedagogical practice.

Whilst this paper has focused on what ethnomethodology offers to animal geographers, there is potential to stretch these findings out into ethnomethodological engagements with other theoretical approaches, methods, and concepts in animal geography. There are points of potential engagement between ethnomethodology and other theoretical and conceptual approaches that have more traditionally been utilised by animal geographers such as ANT and NRT, particularly through their focus on practice and relational doings. However, there are potential challenges to think about when bringing ethnomethodology together with other methods that centre animal behaviour-based approaches and methods which situate animal actions as akin to biological drivers (i.e., geographical methods afforded from genetic analysis; Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2015). Thus, greater critical debate about these challenges are needed. Are there any shared advantages of working these approaches together and if so how can these be utilised in practice? Furthermore, whilst I would argue that ethnomethodology has positive ethical implications such as placing animals as ‘members’ and thus challenging institutional ethics systems which have ignored nonhumans, there are ethical questions that need to be addressed for what this means for animals in the long term, and in political systems which value them as commodities and killable.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A member is someone who is part of society, a group or a social practice. Members are considered competent actors at what they are doing. Members may be those in a queue for a bus stop or those in a dog-training group learning obedience.
- <sup>2</sup> There have been a lot of strong critiques of ethnomethodology over the years, and much of this is recognised as an aversion due to ethnomethodology's inherent challenging of the sociological position. Lynch (1993) addresses these critiques in-depth.

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