

1 **Animal-themed tattoo narratives: Insights into ontological perspectives**

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10 **Conflicts of interest statement**

11 The author declares no conflict of interest.

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15 **Abstract**

16

17 By examining the narratives associated with animal-themed tattoos, this study explores the
18 various ways in which humans relate to other animals. Participants used animal-likenesses to
19 think about themselves, others, and the world around them. By embodying positive attributes
20 of a species that they loved and admired, the tattoos enabled participants to construct meaning
21 and identities based on shared human-animal traits. A thematic discourse analysis of the tattoo
22 narratives grouped them as (1) shared experiences with another species, (2) life experiences
23 and semiotic production of meaning, (3) animal traits embedded in the process of identity
24 formation, (4) animals representing a connection with other humans, or (5) experiences of
25 and/or ideas about animals that represent a profound or transcendent experience. The tattoo
26 narratives were examined in the context of theoretical frameworks associated with “symbolic
27 interactionism” and “interspecies intersubjectivities” to understand how animals were
28 perceived and engaged with. In contrast to how non-human animals are often used as objects
29 of ridicule, or representations of inferiority and uncouthness in various discourses and
30 mediums, the animal subjects of the tattoos discussed here are positively portrayed and
31 incorporated into the bearers’ own identity. Participants merged ideas about humanity and
32 animality in a manner not representative of a naturalistic ontology, but rather a form of
33 anthropomorphism that is dichotomous with naturalism.

34

35 **Keywords**

36 Tattoo narratives, symbolic interactionism, interspecies subjectivities, ontology,
37 anthropomorphism

38

39 **Body of text**

40

41 **Introduction**

42

43 A tattoo is an indelible design created by puncturing the skin and inserting pigments, a custom
44 adopted by numerous cultures throughout history and pre-history (Carr 2005; DeMello 2000;
45 Gilman & Caplan 2001; Samadelli, Melis, Miccoli, Egarter-Vigl, & Zink 2015; Sanders 1991;
46 Tassie 2003). The oldest known figurative tattoos belong to the 5000-year-old remains of a
47 male and female Egyptian, and include depictions of horned animals on the male's upper arm
48 (Friedman et al. 2018). The elaborate horns and long tail of the lower tattoo represents a bovid,
49 probably a type of wild cattle, and the lower is believed to be Barbary sheep (Friedman et al.
50 2018). Both of these animals are well-known in Predynastic art (Hendrickx, Riemer, Förster, &
51 Darnell 2009; Linseele, Van Neer, & Friedman 2009), suggesting a strong bond between these
52 animals and early Egyptian culture. Argent (2013) took an ethnoarchaeological approach to
53 reassess the horse imagery prevalent in the tattooed remains of the Pazyryk, a horse-riding
54 community that buried their dead alongside horses around 2,500 years ago. By drawing
55 comparisons with contemporary human-horse intersubjectivities, Argent (2013) suggested the
56 tattoos represent polysemic materializations of unique bonds between individual humans and
57 horses, of blended identities, and community belonging. The aforementioned examples likely
58 represent relationships with individual animals, or signify the material importance of a
59 particular species. Other tattoos may be more esoteric, intended as magical protection, or an
60 expression of spiritual connections. A 3000-year-old female mummy from the dynastic period
61 was found to be heavily tattooed with designs believed to embody powerful religious
62 significance. These included cow motifs on her arm, associated with the goddess Hathor, and
63 baboons on her neck (Austin & Gobeil 2017; Watson 2016).

64

65 Many cultures have envisioned their deities as possessing animal-like features, including the
66 Ancient Egyptians who depicted gods and goddesses as part animal and viewed certain non-
67 human animals as manifestations of a particular deity (Bussmann 2015; Kaelin 2016; Leeming
68 1994). Hunter-gather people tend to envision their ancestors as aspects of the world around
69 them, including non-human animal forms endowed with supernatural powers (Bird-David
70 1990). Totemism is a system of belief whereby kin groups or individuals engage in a mystical
71 relationship with a particular spirit-being, or totem. Totem ancestors, characterized by dual non-
72 human and human features, is a common theme shared by many disparate cultures (McLean
73 2009). Within ‘Westernized’ culture, the word ‘totem’ is sometimes used to express an affinity
74 felt towards a given animal species, or to construct a sense of identity or belonging (Cayla 2013;
75 Jerolmack & Tavory 2014; Tagliabue 2016). Lévi-Strauss (1962) argued that analogical
76 thought is an inherently human trait, and that totems function to organize thoughts and ideas
77 and to make sense of the physical world. In what Jerolmack and Tavory (2014 p.70) refer to as
78 “everyday totemism” the “concept of totems highlights the deeper and more enduring ways that
79 nonhumans anchor the social self.” The current study focuses on contemporary animal-themed
80 tattoos that incorporate some aspect of a non-human animal species. I use the term “species”
81 here to mean a “kind or sort of animal”, such as an “elephant” or “wolf”, rather than the
82 biological definition. I also use the term “Western” to allude to contemporary cultures in which
83 my participants are embedded. These are multifaceted cultures, born out of civilizations that
84 were dominated by Judeo-Christian doctrine and entrenched in European colonialism, and built
85 upon a materialist worldview that extols the scientific method as a means to understand the
86 world we live in (Birken 1992; Dawes & Smith 2018; Hurn 2012).

87

88 Given that the likeness of a non-human animal is frequently used as a representation of self
89 (Craddick & Miller 1970), it is unsurprising that animal-themed tattoos are the most popular
90 design theme shared on Instagram (Zensa 2017). This paper examines the meanings behind
91 various tattoos, and what the animal imagery might symbolize in terms of individual identity
92 and connections with other animals. Symbolic interaction is a micro-sociological theory that
93 explains the negotiation of meaning as an interactive social process that is in constant flux
94 (Blumer 1969). Rather than being an inherent property of psychology, meanings are created,
95 reproduced, and modified via social interaction. Irvine (2012 p.124) points out that language is
96 a system of symbols that “provides a means to negotiate meaning, to assign names, to engage
97 in discourse, and to build systems of knowledge. This is the sense in which interaction is
98 symbolic.” When engaging with others “we interpret their actions instead of merely responding
99 to them as stimulus and response. A sense of self serves as both a basis for, and consequence
100 of, this interpretation” (Irvine, 2012 p.125). By analyzing narratives accompanying animal-
101 themed tattoos, I examine how participants in this study perceive and engage with non-human
102 animals.

103

104 **Methods**

105

106 Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Exeter College of Social
107 Science and International Studies (SSIS) Ethics Committee. Data collection took place between
108 March and June 2018, and recruitment of participants ran concurrently from March 2018 until
109 the final interview took place. Recruitment occurred as part of a larger project that included
110 tattoos dedicated to an individual animal (Hill 2020) as well as species representations. Social
111 media recruitment consisted of open posts on Facebook and Twitter (using accounts specifically
112 used for academic purposes and identifying myself as a research student) that provided a short

113 explanation of my research interest, followed by an invitation for potential participants to
114 volunteer themselves:

115 *Do you have an animal-themed tattoo, or a design honoring a special animal? I am an*
116 *anthrozoology student investigating human/non-human animal relationships expressed*
117 *through tattoos. If you would be willing to talk about your tattoo(s) and their meaning*
118 *I would love to hear from you. These could be representations of a species you identify*
119 *with or feel strongly about, or a design dedication to a specific individual. I have*
120 *obtained ethical approval from Exeter University, and any material used in my study*
121 *will be appropriately anonymized. If you are willing to be interviewed and/or would like*
122 *more information, please contact me via email <university email address>.*

123

124 My networks were predominantly comprised of individuals with academic, animal, or tattoo
125 interests. Upon request, my posts were shared with my network's audiences and beyond. This
126 method generated self-selecting individuals who were all from English-speaking nations and
127 who were keen to share the meaning attributed to their tattoos. Three of the participants talked
128 about more than one tattoo and the study included a total of 17 tattoo narratives (Table 1). I
129 used saturation sampling, which describes the ongoing process of collecting and analyzing data
130 until key themes are being repeated and nothing new is emerging (Saunders et al. 2018).
131 Unstructured interviews were conducted using video Skype or via prolonged written exchanges
132 using Messenger. The goal was to recreate as much as possible an organic conversation that
133 encouraged the participant to share their own narratives. I started with an open question along
134 the lines of "tell me about your tattoo", and allowed participants to take the lead in sharing
135 whatever they felt comfortable with.

136

137 [Table 1 here]

138

139 Previously, I performed a discourse analysis of narratives constructed around tattoos that
140 commemorate relationships with a companion animal, using theoretic frameworks of
141 multispecies families and griefwork (Hill 2020). In the current study I examine tattoo narratives
142 associated with designs that represent an entire species and explore the various ways in which
143 people raised in “Western” culture relate to other animals. Rather than analyzing the discourses
144 within a theoretic framework, I took a more inductive approach by analyzing emerging themes.
145 I then examined these themes within the context of theoretical frameworks associated with
146 “symbolic interactionism” (Blumer 1969; Irvine 2012) and “interspecies intersubjectivities”
147 (Alger & Alger 1997; Haraway 2008; Irvine 2004; Sanders 2007; Sanders & Arluke 1993;
148 Smuts 2001), and the ontological perspective of “naturalism” described by Descola (2013) and
149 Sahlins (2014).

150

151 **Results**

152

153 Predominant themes emerging from the tattoo narratives were loosely grouped as (1) shared
154 experiences with a non-human animal species, (2) life experiences and semiotic production of
155 meaning, (3) animal traits embedded in the process of identity formation, (4) animals
156 representing a connection with another human(s), or (5) experiences of and/or ideas about
157 animals that represent a profound or transcendent experience. Many narratives had elements
158 that could be associated with more than one of these themes.

159

160 **Interspecies connections**

161 Sammy has several animal-themed tattoos, the first of which is a literal expression of her
162 connection with horses. The connection is built upon relationships and shared experiences,

163 embedded within a human/horse cultural setting. The tattoo is of a playfully rearing horse, and
164 because of her enduring love of horses it is a design she said she would not regret. As a child
165 who lacked confidence, Sammy first discovered a passion for horse-riding at a summer camp.
166 During her troubled adolescence, Sammy says that “being around the horses gave me peace
167 when I really needed it.” Horses remain a part of Sammy’s life, and she told me she now teaches
168 horse-riding to special needs children. Daniella had her tattoo completed in the Chinese Year
169 of the Monkey, following a decade-long passion for primates, particularly callitrichids (small
170 tree-dwelling monkeys). The tattoo incorporates images of individuals she has worked with as
171 zoo-keeper. She said “not only are they my particular favorite individuals, but also my favorite
172 species as a whole.” Daniella relates to these primates on a personal level, and described herself
173 as “a callitrichid weirdo who does not want to change.”

174

175 **Life experiences and semiotic production of meaning**

176 A type of tattoo narrative that Kosut (2000) dubbed “Landmark for Myself” is a form of
177 biographical documentation of important life-changing events or experiences, a feature evident
178 in many of the narratives in this study. Jessica has three animal-themed tattoos; a Chinese
179 character representing the Year of the Tiger, a hummingbird, and an eagle design. Born in the
180 Chinese Year of the Tiger, Jessica got the corresponding symbol in her early twenties. She told
181 me it is not a design she would choose now, but that it represents an identity that was meaningful
182 to her past-self. Unprompted, Jessica used the term “life-story” to describe how she relates to
183 her tattoos. She conceived her eagle design while conducting research in the US, related to
184 extreme weather systems. The tattoo design incorporates a spiral within the eagle that Jessica
185 told me represents a tornado. She was going through a difficult period, for various undisclosed
186 reasons, and during this time developed an interest in native American cultures and customs.
187 Jessica said the eagle represents a “connection to greater things, including the spirit world, and

188 is about rising above problems and gaining a greater perspective.” The hummingbird tattoo
189 marks her time working in South America, where she said she “fell in love with these little
190 birds.” She also developed an interest in the beliefs of the indigenous people of the region, and
191 learned how hummingbirds “represent lightness and joy, and the importance of remembering
192 these things, even during challenging times.” Jessica described how a caged hummingbird
193 usually dies, and through the hummingbird she relates “to the importance of never feeling
194 'caged-in' by circumstances or people.” She also alluded to the inward-facing message of her
195 hummingbird tattoo, and described how she deliberately chose the orientation to be viewed
196 from above because “it was for me to look at, not others.”

197

198 Karen got her tattoo after returning from voluntary work in Africa, where she had encountered
199 lions on safari. She told me she chose the design of her lion because she specifically wanted the
200 lion to look friendly. Karen said she did not want the “fierce” portrayal of lions that is common,
201 because she “loved their calmness and how majestic they were.” Karen’s tattoo is on her thigh,
202 a location that is not always visible, which she said she enjoys because it is “almost like a bit
203 of a secret.” Others have noted that tattoos are not always part of the “public self”, with many
204 choosing a placement that allows easy concealment (Roberts 2012). Doss and Ebesu Hubbard
205 (2009) found that all tattoos are communicative to some extent, and the communicative value
206 increased with visibility. Karen’s dialog suggests her tattoo is only occasionally communicated
207 as part of her public self, but the message may be strengthened by its prior concealment. For
208 example, casual friends or colleagues may be surprised, and thus more curious, upon seeing the
209 tattoo.

210

211 **Identify formation**

212 The “Portrait of Self” tattoo narrative, described by Kosut (2000), is an abstract representation
213 of self. Participants chose animals to represent positive traits they wished to embody. Melanie
214 has a tattoo that depicts three elephants, together with the words “Love” “Faith” and “Wisdom.”
215 Melanie’s narrative is an overt portrayal of herself and her family, using the elephant to embody
216 the desired characteristics. She said “I strongly identify with elephants, as their families are
217 matriarchal like mine, and because they form lifelong bonds.” Elaine says of her tattoo, “wolves
218 are strong, beautiful animals and I like to remind myself that I should be just the same.” The
219 negative association with wolves, harbored by Europeans and Euro-Americans, has been
220 largely replaced and the wolf has become “for many a potent symbol of the wild, the free, the
221 uncommodifiable” (Emel 1995 p.709). Indeed, the wolf is amongst the most popular choices
222 for animal-themed tattoos shared on Instagram (Zensa, 2017), and two participants in this study
223 had wolf-themed tattoos (Table 1).

224

225 Similar to Jessica and Karen, Sophia also has tattoos that signpost her life-journey, including a
226 hummingbird design that marks a period of her life where she first encountered these birds in
227 their natural habitat. However, Sophia’s first tattoo was a seahorse, intended as a feminist
228 symbol. Similar to Jessica, she indicated it is not necessarily a design she would chose now, but
229 that “it felt right at the time.” Sophia was relating to a biological trait of the species, namely
230 child-raising males, and assigning anthropomorphic characteristics to this behavior. In this
231 context, the anthropomorphic reversal of “traditional” gender roles is used as a symbol of
232 feminism. Anthropomorphism is an important framework by which people make sense of
233 interactions with the non-human world (Root-Bernstein, Douglas, Smith, & Veríssimo 2013;
234 Taylor 2011). Elaine’s wolf and Karen’s lion emphasize shared human-non-human traits,
235 whereas other examples apply human perspectives to animal representations. In addition to her

236 horse tattoo, Sammy has symbolic animal representations that encode more abstract ideas. One
237 is “Ferdinand the Bull” sitting under his tree and sniffing a flower. The story of Ferdinand
238 comes from children’s book about a bull who would rather smell flowers than fight, and who
239 ignores the provocations of the matador. The tattoo is accompanied by the word “Ataraxia”,
240 which Sammy explained means “a state of mind free from mental duress that Ferdinand
241 embodies.” She said she also chose a bull because “I’m a Taurus but thought the zodiac symbol
242 was a bit cliché.” Here Sammy is connecting with culturally assigned meanings, and claiming
243 identity with the zodiac sign of Taurus. At the same time, she is expressing a will to free herself
244 from social constraints by identifying with a bull who defies stereotypes. Sammy has a tiger-
245 head tattoo, together with the word “strength”. Here she is using the a socially constructed
246 notion of “tiger-ness” to self-identify with, namely as a “strong” and powerful animal (McCabe
247 2017). She said the tattoo “reminds me that I am a powerful force to be reckoned with.” At the
248 same time, the tiger motif serves as a memory of a period spent doing something significant,
249 because she told me the same symbol is used by a martial arts studio where she trained. She
250 said this is a place where “I felt the strongest.” Similar to the accompanying dialogs of some of
251 Sophia and Jessica’s tattoos, Sammy is using the tiger to connect to a memory, in this case of
252 feeling strong.

253

254 **Animal intermediaries**

255 Clara has a tattoo of a dragonfly, which is both a life narrative and a memorial to her
256 grandmother. The connection to the dragonfly began when her grandmother gave her a charm
257 for her bracelet. The dragonfly charm was gift to mark Suzanna’s enrollment in secondary
258 school, to represent a “spreading of wings.” When she went off to university, Suzanna explained
259 she “felt like I’d really spread my wings and became my own person.” In this respect the tattoo
260 is representative of Clara’s metamorphosis into adulthood, but she also said it is partly intended

261 as a memory of her grandmother. Sophia’s largest piece is a turtle, which commemorates her
262 childhood days spent with her mother at sea turtle sanctuary. Here the connection to a particular
263 species functions as an intermediary, uniting Sophia with a memory of quality time spent with
264 her mother through the shared love of a specific species.

265

266 Rita has a tattoo of a frog, which is a tribute to a friend who died several years ago. She
267 explained to me that frogs were his favorite animal, and one of hers too. They were childhood
268 friends, who spent hours “knee-deep in muddy ponds finding our amphibious friends intriguing
269 and fantastic.” As an adult, Rita told me her friend became an artist who drew many frogs over
270 the years. Following his death, Rita said friends and family started associating the frog with
271 his “spirit”. Rita shared a story about how the younger brother of her friend was visited by frogs
272 in the weeks following his death. The brother would be sat outside smoking late at night, unable
273 sleep, when frogs would approach him and sit nearby. Other’s in their friendship group shared
274 similar frog experiences, including Rita. She explained that one time when she was very
275 stressed and a frog appeared on the side of the bathtub, and another time lots of tiny frogs
276 appeared her kitchen. The frog encounters became so common that Rita and her friends grew
277 accustomed to them, and often share stories as a way of remembering their friend. She said she
278 had been thinking about a tribute tattoo for some time, namely one of her friend’s frog drawings,
279 but the design she ultimately chose was a spontaneous decision. Rita describes her tattoo as
280 follows: “..a silhouette of a frog on a leaf, as if the frog is sitting inside me, like my friend is,
281 forever living inside me, in my memory, in my heart, perched on my soul”.

282

283 **Spirit animals**

284 Jessica alluded to the spiritual connection symbolized by her eagle and hummingbird tattoos,
285 and other participants described connections with “spirit animals”. Dan has a design depicting

286 two wolves cuddling in the shape of a heart in the center under his navel. He tells me this is his
287 favorite tattoo because the wolf is his spirit animal. Intrigued, I asked what he meant by “spirit
288 animal”, and he responded:

289 *My fascination and spiritual connection with wolves came from a dream. I was walking*
290 *through a clearing and the ground began to ascend towards a hilltop, on that hilltop*
291 *was a grey wolf standing proud, and scanning the environment with grace and wisdom.*
292 *I approached and he didn't move, or bare teeth. Instead he sat and patiently waiting for*
293 *me to make my way to the top of the hill. When I reached the top, I sat next to him and*
294 *we stared, together, across the expanse of the clearing. I felt at peace on that hilltop*
295 *with the wolf, then I took three deep breaths, closed my eyes and when I opened them*
296 *again, I was awake.*

297 Ever since this dream, Dan said he had felt “a strong, spiritual connection with all canines.” He
298 believes the dream wolf endowed him with “the ability to connect with his canine descendants
299 on a higher plane.” Dan explained how, whenever he feels lost, he meditates and asks his
300 “animal guide” (the wolf) for his wisdom. Dan said this provides him with the strength to
301 overcome anxiety attacks. Dan’s connection to wolves extends to the physical realm too. He
302 told me that in his hometown there is an animal shelter that homes a pack of wolves, which he
303 often goes to observe. He said “I never felt more at peace in the real world than when I go and
304 watch them.”

305

306 Darren has a jaguar tattoo that also represents an animal he also encountered in a dream,
307 following an experience experimenting with psychedelic drugs. Unlike Dan, who met his wolf
308 in his dream, Darren took on the form of a jaguar. He described how he was pacing through a
309 metropolis and then climbing a tall apartment building and entering his own apartment through
310 a window, where he found his wife was sleeping. Darren explained that in the dream his body

311 was that of a jaguar, but his mind human. When his wife woke up screaming in the dream,
312 Darren described feeling bewildered by her reaction and when he attempted to explain he could
313 make only growling noises. Eventually he morphed back into human form and the dream ended
314 with the couple copulating. Although Darren's experience was the side effect of recreational
315 drug use, rather an intentional shamanic transformation, his experience could be likened to how
316 a Shaman may take on the form of an animal to communicate with the spirit world (Praet, 2013).
317 None-the-less, Darren's dream was profound enough for him to remember the experience and
318 indelibly mark his skin with the likeness of a jaguar and feel an ongoing connection to the
319 species.

320

321 **Discussion**

322

323 Following their study of animal representation in the American popular culture, Herzog and
324 Galvin (1992 p.91) concluded that "basic responses to animals are reflected in mythological
325 themes that occur across cultures and time" and although "our relations with other species are
326 often not as direct as in the past, popular culture continues to reflect the same themes as the
327 myths, legends, and artistic images of our forebears." Many cultures derive partial
328 identification, or demonstrate symbolic assimilation to totems, which often take animal forms
329 (Goswami 2018; McLean 2009). Even in "Western" cultures, animal symbolism and imagery
330 are frequently used to describe the world, or function as individual or group emblems (Root-
331 Bernstein et al. 2013). Levi-Strauss (1962) asserted that analogical thought is inherently human
332 and independent of social context, and argues that totems function to organize thoughts and
333 ideas and make sense of the physical world.

334

335 Some tattoos described here represent shared life-experiences with members of particular
336 species (Sammy's horse; Daniella's primates). Animals are used as a focal point to mark life-
337 events or shared experiences with other humans (Jessica's eagle; Sophia's turtle). Dan's affinity
338 for wolves manifested through a dream, and his wolf spirit-guide functions as a source of inner-
339 strength. Rita's frog is a connection to her deceased friend, and Clara's dragonfly in part a
340 memory of her grandmother. Participants used their ideas and experiences of animal others to
341 express who they were or aspired to be (Sammy's bull; Melanie's elephants; Elaine's wolf), or
342 to align with a particular group identity (Sophia's seahorse; Jessica and Sammy's Chinese
343 zodiac identities). How participants related to the animal species portrayed in their tattoos can
344 be broken into three categories: (1) Symbolic interactionism, where desirable characteristics of
345 a given species are appropriated; (2) Interspecies intersubjectivities, representative of shared
346 experiences with animal others; (3) Animal intermediaries, in the form of a species that
347 represents a shared bond with another human, time, or place, or as a 'spirit animal' that helps
348 navigate the intangible. The later provides some insight into the ontological perspectives of
349 participants.

350

351 **Symbolic interactionism**

352 The theory of "symbolic interactionism" proffers that human interaction and communication is
353 facilitated by objects, words, gestures, and other symbols that have acquired conventionalized
354 meanings. We respond to social symbols and objects via interpretation of their social meaning
355 to us (Blumer 1969). Tattoos themselves are social objects that carry culturally defined signage
356 (Kosut 2000; Oksanen & Turtiainen 2005; Sanders 1991), but the chosen motifs also encode
357 meaning. For example, Elaine's wolf tattoo is both a tattoo and an abstract representation of a
358 wolf. Elaine's associated tattoo narrative adds another level of symbolic interaction in the form
359 of her chosen words. To her the wolves are "strong" and "beautiful", traits that she desires to

360 be associated with. Melanie's elephant tattoo incorporates the words "Love" "Faith" and
361 "Wisdom" as visual signs to reinforce what the elephants mean to her. However, it is her
362 narrative that fully articulates what she considers positive elephant traits, namely their familial
363 loyalty and matriarchy. Berry (2008) describes how humans use nonhuman animals as positive
364 representations of themselves, specifically selecting companion animals, or acquiring animals
365 as possessions based on particular traits they believe will to enhance their own social status.
366 "Association with attractive or exotic animals purportedly represents the humans, perhaps
367 inauthentically, as special" (Berry 2008 p.86). Something similar emerged from this analysis
368 of animal-themed tattoos, whereby the bearer wished to be associated with what they
369 considered positive traits of their chosen animal(s).

370

371 Unlike Berry (2008), who focused on animals as social objects, the tattoos and associated
372 narratives are reflection of an animal as a species. However, this does not mean that reflections
373 do not have consequences to for real-life individuals. Emel (1995 p.708) points out that "how
374 we represent and identify ourselves and others—whether they be animals or people—means
375 everything for what and how we feel or do not feel." Representations of non-human animals
376 often perpetrate stereotypes, emphasizing their perceived "exoticism" or in such a manner that
377 serves to justify poor treatment of individuals (Bettany & Russell 2011; Borkfelt 2011; Emel
378 1995). Even when representations are intended to be positive, Baker (2001) points out that they
379 can never represent any "real" animal. This is especially true with a collection of individuals
380 that are represented as one species. None-the-less, how we represent the species will influence
381 how others may feel towards individual members of that collective. All participants had tattoos
382 that represent animal species they love, admire, or aspire to be like in some way. Concepts of
383 "animality" and "humanity" are culturally construed, and dualistic perception of "us" and
384 "them" underpins cultural beliefs of human superiority over other animals (Ingold, 1988).

385 However, rather than emphasizing difference, participants in this study seem to be merging
386 ideas about “animal” and “human” and incorporating positive aspects into their own identity.

387

388 How members of a given species are perceived and represented by humans will both reflect and
389 impact upon their relationships with humans. But do animals actively participate in the process
390 of semiotic meaning-making? Given that animal-likenesses are used in tattoos without the
391 knowledge or consent of members of that species, it is hard to argue that they do in this context.
392 However, this does not mean non-human animals cannot or do not participate in human culture-
393 making. Furthermore, the tattoos are reflection of how humans perceive and interact with
394 animal others, through firsthand experiences and interactions, or adoption of meanings
395 constructed within multispecies cultures.

396

397 **Interspecies intersubjectivities**

398 When first conceived, symbolic interactionism did not consider non-human animals as capable
399 of participating in symbolic interactions (Blumer 1969). However, scholars such as Alger and
400 Alger (1997), Sanders (2007), Irvine (2012), and other have since extended the theory to
401 recognize the intersubjectivity of non-human minds. Sammy and Daniella have tattoos
402 dedicated to non-human species, horses and callitrichids, respectively, with whom they engaged
403 in intersubjective interactions. Intersubjectivity refers to the shared space between conscious
404 (subjective) minds where shared meaning is made. Recognition that non-human animals may
405 also possess subjective minds has led scholars to consider interspecies intersubjectivity. Tsing
406 (2012 p.141) asserts that “human nature is an interspecies relationship”, meaning that individual
407 humans are in part defined by the how they interact with members of others species. This is a
408 two-way exchange, where non-human individuals are also changed in some-way through
409 interactions with humans (Alger & Alger 1997; Irvine 2004; Sanders & Arluke 1993). During

410 her time spend with a wild baboon troop, Smuts (2001) observed how members of the group
411 treated her as a social being, and in order to gain their trust she learned their social conventions
412 and behaved in accordance with them. Smuts (2001) developed a sense of belonging and claims
413 that over time her subjective identity seemed to merge with theirs.

414

415 Haraway (2008 p.71) defined interspecies intersubjectivity as a space in which one can develop
416 a “response-able” relationship, within which “more than one responsive entity is in the process
417 of becoming.” During her time as a zoo-keeper, Daniella interacted with multiple individuals
418 belonging to various species within the Callitrichidae family, and developed strong bonds with
419 some individuals. Similar to the experience described by Smuts (2001), Daniella’s subjective
420 identity seems to have merged with those of her wards. Sammy’s horse tattoo represents her
421 enduring love of horses and the positive impact horse had on her life. Since learning to ride at
422 a summer camp, Sammy said she gained self-confidence and a sense of inner-peace when
423 around horses. She went on to become a riding instructor and now facilitates interactions
424 between horses and special needs children. Horse-riding is a joint action, and to be done safely
425 requires both human and horse to anticipate the actions of the other and read each-others signals
426 (Argent 2012; Evans & Franklin 2009; Sanders 2007). Argent (2013) considers harmonious
427 human-horse relationships as an ongoing process whereby a novice rider is taught by an
428 experienced, even-tempered, and somewhat tolerant older horse. Once the rider becomes more
429 experienced, they gain the skills and confidence necessary to train a young, nervous, and
430 inexperienced horse. Therefore, safe and enjoyable partnership is achieved via interspecies
431 knowledge that is communicated between humans and horses – horses learn from humans, and
432 humans learn from horses. The Pazyryk were a Bronze-age community who rode, lived with,
433 and buried their dead with horses, and their bodies were often tattooed with horse motifs. We
434 can only speculate whether the Pazyryk tattoos were commemorative of individual horses,

435 decorative, or spiritual. However, based how the horses are portrayed as being playful and
436 intertwined with cosmological symbolism, Argent (2013 p.189) proposes the tattoos are
437 personal, social, and cosmological, and “represent an interspecies ‘narratives of belonging’
438 entangling human and horse bodies and identities into one.”

439

440 On safari, Karen encountered several lions in their native habitat who left a lasting impression.
441 Contrary to the preconceived notion of ferociousness, Karen was struck by their calmness and
442 majestic nature. Likewise, Jessica was enamored by the beauty of the free-living hummingbirds
443 she encountered, and developed an empathy towards caged birds. These are both examples of
444 subjective identities that arose from encounters with animal others, but it is less clear how
445 individuals from the respective species might have engaged in intersubjectivity. However, an
446 operative assumption of intersubjectivity may be sufficient here. Young (2013 p.300) asserted
447 that “intersubjectivity begins with the assumption of its possibility, and that assumption gives
448 meaning and focus to interaction.” Essentially, meaningful interactions do not require accurate
449 or complete knowledge of the other mind, only the assumption of its existence (Young 1999).
450 Young (2013 p.300) believes “our repeated attempts to communicate with other species and
451 their attempts to do likewise are clear evidence of a shared belief in the possibility of
452 interspecies intersubjectivity.” Karen encountered lions in the flesh, albeit from a distance, who
453 were undoubtedly aware of human presence and reacted based on previous experiences with
454 humans. The fact that Karen perceived “calmness” suggests the lions she encountered were not
455 threatened by human proximity.

456

457 **Animal intermediaries**

458 What I call “animal intermediaries” are a species that represents human connections to time
459 (Jessica’s hummingbird), places (Sammy’s tiger), or people. Sophia’s turtle, Rita’s frog, and

460 Clara's dragonfly are design that incorporate a likeness to a specific type of animal that
461 represents a connection to another person. For Clara, the connection is more symbolic, alluding
462 to a charm bracelet that also used the dragonfly motif as a symbol of "spreading one's wings."
463 For Sophia and Rita, the tattoo incorporates the image of a species that, through shared
464 interspecies interactions with, bonds were solidified between human individuals. Sophia and
465 her mother spent time at a sea-turtle sanctuary, and shared a love of this species. Rita and her
466 friend shared a childhood fascination with frogs, forming memories together of "times spent in
467 around muddy ponds." Her friend continued to express his connection to frogs in his art, and
468 after his death members of his friends and family experienced frog encounters as connection to
469 his spirit.

470

471 Rita's frog tattoo represents a species that unites her and her deceased friend. The connection
472 was first formed through shared experiences of amphibians. However, the frog took on a more
473 spiritual dimension following her friends' death, becoming associated with his spirit. Dan first
474 encountered a wolf in his dream, which he describes as his "spirit animal" from whom he
475 derives inner strength. Although first encountered in a dream, Dan later sought out the company
476 of physical wolves in a sanctuary. The animals incorporated into Jessica's tattoos represent
477 species native to geographical regions where she spent significant periods of her life, as well as
478 animals she felt an innate attraction towards. Her narrative also indicates she actively sought
479 out meaning through animal symbolic interactionism. Indeed, most of the narratives discussed
480 here could be described as attempts to articulate ideas or perceptions of reality that are not easily
481 expressed in the language of "Western" science and materialism. "Western" education focuses
482 on phenomena that can be measured and are amenable to the scientific method. This dissociates
483 the student from their lived experiences, and dismisses the intangible (Gaudelli 2020). Members
484 of predominantly white privileged "New Age" spiritual movements are often guilty of cultural

485 appropriation. However, while the insensitive and exploitative adoption of cultural capital is
486 never acceptable, those raised in naturalistic cultures are arguably lacking in language and tools
487 to describe certain phenomena (Waldron & Newton 2012). Indeed, participants seemed to be
488 searching for words or ideas that could explain their lived and intangible experiences.

489

490 **Ontological perspectives**

491 Ontology can be broadly defined as the study of reality, as perceived by human cultures, and
492 examines how people engage with the world around them (Kohn 2015). According to Descola
493 (2013), four basic ontologies underpin social collectives, namely animism, naturalism,
494 totemism, and analogism. Descola (2013) uses “interiority” and “physicality” to describe
495 immaterial (culture, “soul”, reflective thought, etc.,) and material-visible (physical/biological)
496 qualities, respectively, and takes a comparative approach from a naturalistic perspective.
497 Naturalism is the belief that entities share similar physicalities but are separated by dissimilar
498 interiorities, animism perceives human and non-human entities as comprised of different
499 material (different physicalities) but connected “spiritually” (similar interiorities), totemism is
500 the continuity between entities, and analogism is based on radical differences. Naturalism
501 ascribes only human minds with subjectivity, and a naturalistic viewpoint underpins the modern
502 scientific method (Dawes & Smith 2018). However, the concept of interspecies
503 intersubjectivity depends on the assumption that non-human animals also have subjective
504 minds (Alger & Alger 1997; Sanders & Arluke 1993; Smuts 2001, 2006; Young 2013).
505 Contrary to one of precepts of naturalism, participants seem to embrace the notion that animal
506 others also have subjective minds.

507

508 Kohn (2015 p.317) observes that “only with naturalism is ‘nature’ as an object external to our
509 subjective selves conceivable.” Although “nature” is a social construct which makes

510 distinctions between “human” and “non-human”, the tattoo-narratives described here often
511 merge ideas about human and non-human beings. While naturalism arguably underpins much
512 of “Western” thought, scholarship, and ideology, naturalism appears too rigid to embrace the
513 full range of inherent human emotions or experiences. Ethnographic fieldwork by Zuppi (2017)
514 concluded that Descola’s naturalism model proved inadequate to account for how animals were
515 represented by villagers of a French farming community. Candea and Alcayna-Stevens (2012)
516 also noted that ethnographic accounts of self-ascribed “Western” practices invariably focus on
517 purported transgressions from the canon of naturalist ontology. The idea of “Western” culture
518 itself is problematic, because as Ingold (2000 p.6) noted, “once we get to know people well -
519 even the inhabitants of nominally western countries - not one of them turns out to be a full-
520 blooded westerner.”

521

522 Elements of both totemistic and animistic ontologies could be inferred from the tattoo narratives
523 described here. Essentially, animism is the belief that all animals, plants, places, and inanimate
524 objects possess a distinct spiritual essence (Bird-David 1999; Brightman, Grotti, &
525 Ulturgasheva 2012; Descola 2013; Ingold 2006; Praet 2013). Totemism is a belief system
526 whereby an individual, or a group, are bound by their mystical relationship with a spirit-being
527 (Goswami 2018; Kohn 2015; Levi-Strauss 1962). Rita describes how her friend’s spirit lives
528 on in the form of a frog. The frog could also be described as the totem of her friend, and after
529 his death the frog-totem became something to unite his friends and family. Dan met his “spirit
530 animal” in a dream, and similar to animistic shamanic experiences (Praet 2013), Darren took
531 on the form of a jaguar in his dream. Through her studies of indigenous peoples of the Americas,
532 Jessica may be adopting ideas that are not easily articulated in the language of her cultural
533 upbringing. That participants express ideas akin to animistic and totemistic belief systems,
534 supports the conclusion that naturalism is not the default ontology of contemporary “Western”

535 cultures. However, rather than adhering to models of totemism and animism that are antithetical
536 (Descola 2013), the narratives examined in this study support ontological principles that are
537 related and/or interdependent (Brightman et al. 2012; Sahlins 2014; Willerslev & Ulturgasheva
538 2012). Sahlins (2014) proposed that totemism is a form of animism, which itself is a form of
539 anthropomorphism, and that anthropomorphism is dichotomous with naturalism. In its broadest
540 sense, anthropomorphism can be defined as the attribution of human characteristics to
541 nonhuman entities, which is something all participants did to some extent. The problem
542 becomes determining what exactly is a human characteristic, because whatever unique
543 attributes (language, self-awareness, culture, personhood) we assign, upon closer examination
544 can be found to exist to some degree in other animals (Irvine 2012; Laland & Hoppitt 2003).
545 Within the “Western” context of human/animal dualism and naturalism, anthropomorphic
546 representations are often viewed as transgressive and fanciful, but all humans arguably
547 construct anthropomorphic meanings (Candea 2012; Root-Bernstein et al. 2013). Participants
548 in this study are not assigning traits to non-humans that they consider exclusively human.
549 Rather they are embodying shared characteristics.

550

551 **Conclusions**

552

553 The human body carries signage that we read when we interact with others. These “sign
554 vehicles” include birth-given characteristics, such as race and gender, together with signs that
555 are culturally given” (Kosut 2000 p.79). Tattooing is culturally defined signage, but less
556 permanent examples include make-up, clothing, accessories, and jewelry (Kosut 2000;
557 Oksanen & Turtiainen 2005; Sanders 1991). Participants in this study used animal-themed
558 tattoos as culturally defined signage to communicate ideas and relate to the world around them.
559 However, they could have used animal-themed jewelry, handbags, or scarves adorned with

560 particular animal motifs in a similar fashion. Thus, animal-themed tattoos are just one example
561 of how humans think about, or think with animals (Daston & Mitman 2005).

562

563 By analyzing their tattoo narratives, this study highlighted the multiple ways in which
564 participants thought about and engaged in animal others. Levi-Strauss (1962) coined the term
565 “good to think” to describe how totemistic animals are used as an integral part of the structure
566 of thinking. Why and how we use other animals to think with is explored in depth by Daston &
567 Mitman (2005 p.2), who discuss how humans use animals to “symbolize, dramatize, and
568 illuminate aspects of their own experiences and fantasies.” The participants in this study used
569 non-human animal characteristics to think about themselves, others, and the world around them.
570 By aligning themselves with an animal species they loved and admired, the tattoos enabled
571 participants to express individual identity, embody specific traits, and connect to particular
572 people, groups and ideologies. Maston & Mitman (2005) recognize that we not only use animals
573 as symbols, but that we are animals who think “together” with other animals who are also part
574 of our world. This study also presented examples how animal encounters have shaped identity
575 and beliefs, placing animals as active participants in symbolic interactionism. Participants used
576 anthropomorphic language that merged ideas about humanity and animality that were not
577 representative of a naturalistic ontology. Neither did they align exactly with ethnographic
578 descriptions of animism and totemism outside of “Western” cultures (Bird-David 1999; Kohn
579 2015; Pedersen 2001; Rosengren 2006). This is consistent with Sahlins (2014), who proffered
580 that animism and totemism are forms of anthropomorphism, and that anthropomorphism is
581 dichotomous with naturalism.

582

583 Furthermore, participants did not use animals simply as abstract ideas to “think with”, but also
584 to also “think about” animal others with respect, love, and admiration. Contrary to my previous

585 analysis of tattoos dedicated to individual companion animals (Hill, 2020), the animal-themed
586 tattoos in the current study depict a collective identity. Rather than reflecting a special bond
587 shared with a non-human person, some of the narratives discussed here represent bonds to entire
588 species that are based on interactions with multiple members of that species. However, this does
589 not mean individuality is not recognized. For example, to love and understand horses as a
590 species requires an appreciation that every horse is also an individual. Even where interpersonal
591 relations are absent, the animal subjects of the tattoos are positively portrayed and incorporated
592 into the bearers' identity. It could be speculated that animal imagery used in less permanent
593 culturally defined signage, such as jewelry or personal accessories, would be similarly framed.
594 This is in stark contrast to how animals are often portrayed in art, media, film, children's books,
595 advertising, etc., as objects of ridicule, inferiority, uncouthness, or used in politics and
596 propaganda to dehumanize particular groups of people (Bettany & Russell 2011; Borkfelt 2011;
597 Lerner & Kalof 1999).

598

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600

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849

850 **Tables**

851

852 Table 1. Biographic information of participants.

Name	Nationality	Occupation	Species represented in tattoo design(s)
Sammy (F)	Australian	Horse trainer	Horse, Bull, Tiger
Daniella (F)	British	Zoo keeper	Primates
Jessica (F)	British	n.d.	Tiger, Eagle, Hummingbird
Karen (F)	British	Zoo keeper	Lion
Melanie (F)	American	Veterinary Nurse	Elephants
Elaine (F)	British	n.d.	Wolf
Sophia (F)	British	Academic	Turtle, Hummingbird, Seahorse
Clara (F)	British	Travelling	Dragonfly
Rita (F)	British	n.d.	Frog
Dan (M)	American	n.d.	Wolves
Darren (M)	American	Student	Jaguar

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854 Names are changed and listed in the order they first appear in the text; (F), female; (M), male;

855 n.d., not determined.

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