

# Intimate entanglements in the animal house: Caring for and about mice

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**Abstract**

This article presents two vignettes from ethnographic research conducted in a 'biological services unit' or mouse house at a life sciences research institute in the UK. I focus on the 'intimate knowledge' two animal technicians demonstrated as crucial to care for the mice, where affective knowledge operated alongside scientific knowledge of animal welfare and administrative knowledge of keeping laboratory animals. I then show how caring for and about laboratory mice entailed caring about various other things, things that could help improve the lives of the mice. I thematize how the animal technicians 'care about' mice, using Astrid Schrader's twin conceptions of compassion and 'abyssal intimacy'. However, unlike Schrader and much of the literature focusing on the centrality of 'sacrifice' in scientific research involving laboratory animals, I contend that compassion is not centrally informed by death as the abyss here. Rather, the violent relatedness of being replaceable forms the abyss that makes compassion possible. It was the fact of caring about those with whom one becomes so intimately entangled, within the context of paid labour where one is replaceable, that formed the basis for compassion between animal technicians, mice and myself.

**Keywords**

abyssal intimacy, care, compassion, intimate knowledge, laboratory animals

**Introduction**

Intimacy is a trope that is increasingly being used to understand the socialities of laboratory animals. Both Mette Svendsen and Lene Koch (2013) and Lesley Sharp (2018) have brought anthropological knowledge on everyday morality to bear on questions about the 'ethics' of using laboratory animals in scientific research. For both, the intimate relations between scientists and animals – their physical closeness and togetherness that creates affinities, affections and understandings – is a starting point. For example, with

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the concept of corporeal exchange, Svendsen and Koch (2013) delineate the intimate relationships that occur between scientists and pigs – such as feeding the pigs individually and ‘dropping in’ to see how the piglets are doing – that exceed the animal model paradigm, and that are frequently erased as a result. Sharp (2018) uses ‘intimacy’ to encode the everyday moralities of scientists and animal technicians, which arise in part because of the affective relationships that develop when one spends a significant amount of time with another species in doing scientific research and in part because of the ways in which emotions and sentiment are socially structured.

Intimacy becomes a trope for rendering visible these relations, which we do not normally think of as being part and parcel of science and the production of scientific knowledge. Significantly, death has been a key reference point in the work of both Svendsen and Koch (2013; see also Dam & Svendsen, 2018; Svendsen, Navne, Gjødsbøl, & Dam, 2018) and Sharp (2018) in describing the everyday ethics involved in caring for and killing animals of one species to improve the lives of another species. Building on this scholarship, I present here two vignettes from ethnographic research I conducted in a ‘biological services unit’ or animal house at a research institute in the UK. This is part of a larger study funded by the Wellcome Trust that asks how much and why scientists in the UK think that quality animal care is a precondition for good science, and where this idea comes from. The animal technicians at the research institute where I conducted the ethnographic research worked almost exclusively with mice. I focus on the intimate knowledge (Raffles, 2002) that two animal technicians demonstrated to me as crucial in caring for these mice. Their affective knowledge operated alongside their scientific knowledge of animal welfare and their administrative knowledge of keeping laboratory animals (Davies, Greenhough, Hobson-West, & Kirk, 2018) in doing the work of caring for laboratory mice. I then show how this intimate knowledge of caring for laboratory animals entailed caring about various things that could improve the lives of the mice – specifically mustard seeds and their distribution. I thematize ‘caring about’ laboratory animals through Astrid Schrader’s concept of ‘abyssal intimacy’ (Schrader, 2015). However, I contend that compassion, which the animal technicians I observed have, for mice – and the compassion that I developed for the animal technicians – is not centrally informed by death as the abyss. Rather, I contend that the violent relatedness of being replaceable formed the abyss in this abyssal intimacy. It was the fact of caring about those with whom one becomes so intimately entangled, within the context of paid labour where one is replaceable, that formed the basis for compassion between animal technicians, mice and myself.

## **Intimate entanglement I: Seeing and feeling another**

Today I am shadowing Martine, a young animal technician who has recently switched her focus to laboratory animals. Martine says that she enjoys this work, and she enjoys science. She tells me straightaway that she finds my work as a sociologist confusing, to work with people, as a scientist. Martine proudly presents herself as an animal person, and as someone who would much rather be in the presence of animals. She longs for a cat, not a baby – much to her mother’s concern. Martine therefore finds me, a sociologist – a scientist of people – a curiosity, one that she is nonetheless intrigued to learn a little

bit more about during our day together. The fact that I am also the mother of a human child is of little interest to Martine. We instead talk a lot about my dog. In various ways, animals are the point at which Martine and I meet one another, making it possible for us to 'be alongside' (Latimer, 2013) one another, and to find moments of partial understanding (see also Latimer in this edition). Joanna Latimer develops 'being alongside' to capture interspecies relations of togetherness that do not collapse into wholes. The intimacy of the home – pets and mothers and children – grounds Martine and my conversations about what it is like to care for laboratory animals; referencing, accepting and rejecting different kinds of domestic intimacy is how we find ways to understand one another, and the different kinds of work and cares that have brought us together.

Martine starts by explaining that today is a slow day, as it is Friday. And so all she will be doing is checking the cages that are homes to the mice that she cares for. The cages are checked twice every day, per Home Office regulations of laboratory animal welfare practices in the UK. But Martine explains that the Friday afternoon check is more rigorous. If she thinks any cage may be at all low on food, or in need of a change in bedding, Martine wants to address this now. This is as much for the mice as it is for her colleagues; the idea is that the animal technician who will be coming in over the weekend to check on the mice twice each day can do so more quickly if the Friday afternoon check is thorough. But Martine also doesn't want there to be any risk of the mice having their needs unmet over the weekend.

Martine begins by ensuring the water filtration system is working for the rack, which holds approximate 100 cages each containing anywhere from one to six mice. Martine then pulls out one cage at a time to visually check the mice, ideally without having to open the cage and disturb them. If Martine needs to open the cage to give more food or check on the mice more closely, she will flip the tag on the cage up so that she can do this additional work after checking the entire rack.

I comment that Martine is clearly seeing things that I cannot see as she checks the mice without opening their cages. Martine agrees with my assessment, but struggles to put into words exactly how she goes about *knowing* that the mice are okay by looking into, but not opening, the cage. A few minutes later, she says: 'Do you want me to show you a trick?' I eagerly say 'Yes!' Martine is holding a cage in which all the mice are huddled together under a red tunnel, which I have been told allows the mice to feel like they are in the dark while the animal technician is still able to see the mice inside the cage. This allows Martine to count the mice, and visually ensure the correct number of mice are present. Martine has the cage resting in one hand, with the other hand on the side of the cage, and is holding it at eye level so that she can look in. Martine goes on to tell me that she always puts her hand underneath the mice on the bottom of the plastic cage in an instance like this, to make sure that she *feels* their body heat. By feeling their warmth, through the plastic cage, Martine knows the mice are alive. That way Martine checks on the mice, makes sure that they are not only physically there by seeing them but also that they are physically okay by feeling the traces of their presence. But she does not have to disrupt the mice and wake them up by opening the cage in order to do so. She reminds me that mice are nocturnal after all, and they like to sleep when we like to work.

I asked Martine if someone taught her this trick, as she has just taught me. She says no, it is just something she picked up by herself over time. Martine remembers that she

hadn't realized she was even doing this per se; she just always put her hand on the part of the cage that was underneath where the mice had nested themselves, and felt their body heat through the plastic. One day Martine didn't feel warmth when she did this, and she knew something was wrong. It was probably at that point that she became cognizant of what she had long been doing when she checked the mice in the cages. Martine pauses and reflects for a minute. She then sums up her work in this way to me: as the opposite to a physician's work. Martine continues that, by working with hundreds of cages, day in and day out, week after week, she has gotten a sense of what is normal. And when things aren't normal, she knows that something is wrong; she then works to figure out what is wrong. This is the opposite of the doctor, who works with hundreds of sick, human patients to learn about abnormalities. Physicians start with abnormality; Martine says that she starts with normality.

### *Intimate knowledge*

In his development of intimate knowledge as a concept, Hugh Raffles (2002, p. 328) begins with the delineation of local knowledge; social scientists have used local knowledge to mark out ways of knowing that are emplaced and born out of experience, which involves a kind of intimacy not available to an outsider (e.g. Geertz, 2010). My interaction with Martine, and her demonstration of how she uses her body to feel the presence of the mice and know that the mice are physically okay, could be defined as an expression of local knowledge according to this definition. Martine's knowledge of how to care for laboratory mice is born out of her extensive experience, day after day and week after week of caring for the mice in hundreds of boxes. And it was very difficult for me to see that knowledge at work, as it involves a kind of intimacy that I as an outsider could not recognize. Martine explains this knowledge to me as embodied; she uses every bodily sense possible – not only seeing from a distance but also feeling from a distance – to ensure that the mice in her care are okay.

But local knowledge is also awkward when I try to understand this moment. To start, Martine and I are emplaced within the universality of global scientific knowledge. Indeed, the work of animal technicians has been professionalized and scientized since the mid-twentieth century in order to transform what had been 'local knowledge' into scientific knowledge (Druglitrø, 2017; Greenhough & Roe, 2011, 2018; Kirk, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016). The life scientists using the mice born, bred, modified and killed in the animal house and the veterinarians and technicians doing the work of creating these animals come together through science. Science makes it possible for the life sciences and laboratory animal welfare and care to 'become alongside' (Latimer, 2013) one another.

That said, within the animal house, veterinarians and animal technicians are ultimately servicing the life scientists who use these mice in their research. Their science is therefore subjugated to some degree. There is, as Raffles (2002, p. 331) notes, 'a process through which the hierarchies of knowledge are established, and in which the descriptive is distinguished from the analytical, the anecdotal is distinguished from the systematic, the mythical from the factual, the information from the data'. While much of Martine's knowledge is informed by the science of animal welfare, like other areas of care work this codified knowledge is simply not enough. Martine must always also draw on

affective knowledge, and this is the kind of knowledge she is showing me in this moment. It was not something that someone taught her, but something she learned through experience and time – such that she herself did not even ‘know’ she was doing it.

Raffles (2002) wants to replace the ‘local’ in local knowledge with ‘intimate’ in order to put another set of relations to the fore. Rather than put local knowledge in subjugated relation to scientific knowledge, Raffles emphasizes that all knowledges are – although to varying degrees – intimate. For Raffles, intimate knowledge is mediated by affect, it occurs through bodies in an encounter that happens in time and space, and it embeds relations of power. Intimate knowledge is not understood in subjugated relation to another way of knowing. Raffles argues: ‘There is no universal against which intimacy is parochialised’ (Raffles, 2002, p. 332). In this context, it is helpful to think about animal technicians’ knowledge as intimate knowledge. As Davies et al. (2018, p. 609) have shown, caring for laboratory animals requires extensive scientific and bureaucratic knowledge; they use ‘hybridity’ to delineate these multiple knowledge practices that converge in laboratory animal welfare. Intimate knowledge is similarly a way to understand the multiple ways of knowing that animal technicians navigate in caring for their animals without having to create a hierarchy of scientific, administrative and affective knowledges.

## **Intimate entanglement 2: Seeing and hearing another**

I am spending the day with Janet, another animal technician who has worked with laboratory animals of just about every species for around 35 years. Janet is taking care of the female Balb C mice in the animal house today. These mice are used by one of the laboratories in the institute that focuses on questions of ageing and immunity. This lab is interested in understanding the mechanisms by which younger people take up vaccines more efficiently than older people. To ask questions about this process, they used mice as models, comparing how young and old mice respond to vaccines. To conduct this research, they need a population of very old mice – generally two years. Ageing these mice is the work of the animal house. And today I am watching how the animal technicians care for extremely elderly female mice, who are prone to cancers.

Throughout the day, Janet tells me about what she is doing to try to improve the lives of these elderly mice above and beyond providing them with the care that is legally required, and that the veterinarians have decided represents best practice. Janet worries about the wellbeing of mice living in small cages for such a long time, which she believes must be rather boring for them. Specifically, she thinks that the sunflower seeds, which the animal house uses as a form of enrichment for its mice, are too easy for the mice to find and open. She worries that the sunflower seeds do not keep the mice properly interested, especially if they are alive for so long. Janet tells me that she thinks that mustard seeds, which are smaller and more difficult to find and open, might be a better kind of enrichment for these very elderly mice. Due to the biosecurity requirements of the facility, Janet needs to find a supplier who can package the mustard seeds in a way that can be irradiated before entering the facility. She has been spending her spare time trying to find such a supplier. Janet’s care for and about the mice becomes a key way in which Janet and I were alongside one another throughout the day.

Astrid Schrader (2015) has distinguished 'caring for' from 'caring about'. Here Schrader can be understood as building upon and extending Joan Tronto's (1993) ethical consideration of different kinds of care, ranging from 'taking care of', 'caring about', 'care giving' and 'care receiving'. Schrader notes that 'caring for' is an act that is goal oriented, where the receiver of care is defined by a lack of ability or autonomy. She contrasts this with 'caring about', which does not have a predefined object of care but is instead an affective relation that is open to becoming with another, including those whose existence one may have not been previously aware of (see also Despret, 2004, 2005, 2008; Haraway, 2008; Latimer, 2011, 2013; Latimer & Puig de la Bellacasa, 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, 2015). I think what Janet was trying to do throughout the day was to show me that she cares for laboratory mice very well, and in accord with veterinary knowledge and the science of animal welfare. But Janet also wants me to understand that she cares about her mice, so much so that she has come to care about mustard seeds and their distribution as well. Like Martine, Janet is showing me the different kinds of intimate knowledges she moves between as part of both caring for and caring about laboratory mice.

Janet tells me all of this while we are working in a room where two other animal technicians are also working with the mice. Retrospectively, I realize that this was a semi-public conversation that Janet and I were having, as she showed me how she cares for the laboratory mice by not only checking on their physical wellbeing but also by caring about things like mustard seeds. The intimate knowledge of animal technicians was a public story, one that Janet could publicly tell me while being amongst her colleagues. Janet was performing the doing of being an animal technician (Goffman, 1958).

Toward the end of the day, I follow Janet as she is cleaning up, moving between various rooms of the experimental unit in the animal house and bringing used equipment to the 'dirty room'. This room is silent and empty, with no windows looking into it. Metal shelves surround the edge of the room, and it is extremely antiseptic in feel. There is only the door leading into the room and another double metal door, behind which the dirty equipment is left. The room is white and metallic; there is very little else. Inside this closed off and quiet room, Janet leans back against a metal shelf. She is quiet for a moment.

Janet then starts to talk. She tells me that her family knows that she is an animal technician, but none of her friends know what she does for work. I was not immediately surprised by this revelation. I knew that she had been an animal technician for over 30 years, and so would have worked in this profession during the late 1990s when some animal rights activists were taking violent measures. I also knew from other sociological research that animal technicians frequently do not publicly announce their profession for fear of judgement (Arluke, 1991; Birke, Arluke, & Michael, 2007; Michael & Birke, 1994). I continued to listen.

Janet went on to explain that she had been targeted by animal rights activists in the late 1990s, and her family was threatened as well. When her family was threatened, she said that she decided to quit her job. This was not surprising to me either, and I can imagine feeling quite the same; that one would want to protect their family from violence is assumed by many, in fact this is precisely why this kind of tactic is used. What did surprise me was Janet's reasoning for not quitting.

Janet continued to tell me that she knew, if she quit her job, she would be replaced. She worried that her replacement would not care about the animals as much as she did.

And so she decided that she owed it to her animals to stay in the job, to continue to look after them. That is why she is still an animal technician today.

I had a physical reaction to this part of Janet's story that is difficult for me to put into words. I was surprised by Janet's decision, and it felt like the story moved through my body. I also felt a strong emotional reaction, and still do to this day. The emotion is probably best described as a mixture of incredible respect and sadness. The feelings I experienced were profound; I was moved by Janet's story and her commitment to her work, to her care for and about laboratory animals.

After a moment of quiet, Janet got up and went to the door. She had made a confession of sorts, and was ready to move on. I had to pull myself together and quickly follow her; I had to move on just as Janet did and was.

### *Abyssal intimacy*

In order to make legible how we might come to care about something that we hadn't ever thought to care about before – such as mustard seeds – Schrader (2015) develops the notion of abyssal intimacy. Schrader here argues that compassion not empathy is the starting point for this kind of intimacy, which is variously about: 'suffering with another'; not altruism nor identification but 'the disturbance of violent relatedness'; and 'the possibility of sharing such a non-power' with the consequence that affect becomes disconnected from the physics of motion (Schrader, 2015, p. 683). Compassion is not action, and this is the radical break that Schrader wants to emphasize through the abyss.

I think what makes me feel sadness, when I think about Janet's story, is the way in which she makes explicit a shared vulnerability with laboratory animals. Janet seemed to understand herself as *being perceived as replaceable* – at least by the organization in which she worked in the late 1990s (which is not the organization I was shadowing her at) but probably more generally by the institution of science and paid labour in capitalism. Someone else would be hired in her place. And they might not be as good at the job, at least from the perspective of the animals – whose perspective would never be known. This trope of being replaceable has an affinity with the laboratory animal. Laboratory animals are valuable as a population – or at least laboratory mice are. Individual mice are largely understood as interchangeable.<sup>1</sup>

The individuality and uniqueness of the animal technician and the laboratory animal alike is at particular risk. In his analysis of people's relationships with their dogs, Clinton Sanders cites a phenomenological psychologist who says this about his dog:

History informs the experience of a particular animal whether or not it can tell that history. Events in the life of an animal shape and even constitute him or her. ... Sabaka is an individual in that he is not constituted through and I do not live toward him as a species-specific behavioural repertoire or developmental sequence. More positively, he is an individual in that he is both subject to and subject of 'true historical particulars' ... *I can not replace him, nor ethically, can I 'sacrifice' him for he is a unique individual being.* (Shapiro, 1986, in Sanders, 2003, p. 410, emphasis added)

Being replaceable and 'sac-able' – a word that Lesley Sharp (2018) points out is commonly used to describe the killing of laboratory animals, and she notes the double entendre – is

here linked to the laboratory animal who represents the species, or even another species, and distinguishes the laboratory animal from the pet. The pet has history, whether or not it can tell that history. But does the laboratory animal as part of a population have history? Janet articulates herself as sharing this vulnerability with the laboratory animals she cares for, and this shared vulnerability becomes part of her compassion.

The perspectives of not only laboratory animals but also animal technicians are too often represented by another (Greenhough & Roe, 2018); they are both – in the words of Adele Clarke (Clarke, 2005; Clarke & Montini, 1993) – ‘implicated actors’, represented by others but very rarely representing themselves. Janet seemed to express that she cares about the laboratory animals by being open to ‘becoming alongside’ (Latimer, 2013) them, by sharing the vulnerability of being replaceable with the laboratory animals she cares for. What is expressed – or at least what I hear – is a violent relatedness between animal technicians and laboratory animals where there is no clear way to rid oneself or another of being replaceable. There was nothing I could do but hear this.

With abyssal intimacy, Schrader (2015) wants us to think about care as something that is not always and only action-oriented; that is, care is not only about doing something to be rid of vulnerability but also about a willingness to be vulnerable. Schrader (2015, p. 683) is arguing for a space to think about care as moments that keep ‘the viewer suspended in a zone of indeterminacy, hesitating, slowing down, not exactly knowing what to do, confused, listening intensely to what might still be hidden before and behind ... but also desiring to act with passion’. This argument resonates with Stengers’ (2010; see also Haraway, 2008) argument for a slow science. Schrader thus argues that compassion moves us, but not necessarily in ways that prompt action.

The animal rights activist and the animal technician are often placed in polarized positions to one another. And yet both care with passion about the lives of laboratory animals. The animal rights activist asserts that she cares about laboratory animals through direct action and active resistance against their use in science. Janet asserts that she cares about laboratory animals by being with laboratory animals, caring for their needs and caring about improving their wellbeing. There are different ways of caring about more than human life. The goal is not to valorize one kind of caring at the expense of the other, to say that one kind of care is right where another is wrong. But the point is instead to say that there are different ways of caring, and there are good reasons to unsettle both (Murphy, 2015).

For Schrader (2015), the abyss is figured in relationship to death, where mortality is the basis for shared vulnerability. Interestingly it is not mortality that frames the abyssal intimacy of Janet with her mice, however. It is instead replace-ability that forms the abyss. I think that this is important for how we think about animal technicians’ work, and possibly care work more generally. Much of the social science literature on laboratory animals focuses on mortality: what are the ethics of making animals of one species live and ultimately die to improve the lives of (some) in another species? Sacrifice is the key trope through which this practice, and the attendant ethics and moralities of such, are framed (Lynch, 1990; Sharp, 2018; Svendsen & Koch, 2013). What does replace-ability signify in this context? And why are death and replace-ability so intertwined, as the quote above regarding the significance of a pet dog makes clear? I think that replace-ability highlights a thread of precarity in the thanatopolitics of biomedical science.



I have on occasion remarked casually that one of the things I have learned in doing this research on laboratory animal care in science is that death is not the worst thing. Death is ever present (Sharp, 2018; Svendsen & Koch, 2013). But it has not moved me in the ways that the abyss of replace-ability has.

I think that replace-ability says something important about the dilemmas of caring about what one is paid to care for. When I think about it, I know that I am replaceable from my employer's perspective. The intimate knowledge and the abyssal intimacies that one develops in the workplace are nullified in value through metrics and calculative exchanges (Bowker & Star, 1999; Latimer, 2000). This is what makes the intimate entanglements of the workplace different from those that arise in unpaid labour. I know that I am not replaceable in my unpaid care for my daughter. I thus share the vulnerability of laboratory animals and animal technicians in being replaceable, and particularly with the animal technicians by working in an environment that I care quite a lot about but that can replace me.

## Conclusion

I have often wished that I said something that would have indicated to Martine and Janet how much their approach to their work moved me. While I was moved, emotionally and internally, I didn't *do* anything. I was silent. I 'hesitated' (López-Gómez, forthcoming) possibly because there was no assurance that I *could do* anything. Writing this is my attempt to say thank you in some sense; to try to show that, while I did nothing, I was trying to listen well. And I think listening well is an important way to act passionately and with compassion in abyssal intimacy, and that listening well often requires hesitancy. Listening well requires time.

My goal is not to give voice to animal technicians in this essay. There is, after all, only an *n* of two presented here. I fully agree with Greenhough and Roe (2018) that what we need is not more representations of animal technicians' knowledge, but rather we need to listen better to what animal technicians have to say. Animal technicians do caring for and caring about in ways that I aspire to become more entangled with (see also López-Gómez, forthcoming). This essay represents an attempt to listen to two animal technicians well, asking 'what counts' (Despret, 2005) to them in the doing of their work.

Being alongside people who work alongside animals rather ironically highlights the emotional labour involved in doing ethnographic encounters well, and appreciating this kind of togetherness as a necessarily 'demanding relation' (Munro, in Latimer, 2013). In an ironic twist for animal studies, listening to the animal was explicit in the animal house; the work of listening to another species did not need to be made explicit in the way that it does for the social sciences. Efforts are put into listening to animals well, responding to animals well and trying to make animals interested in their lives within science. What is implicit is the work that goes into listening to other people well, responding to other people well and trying to learn what other people are interested in by finding ways to partially connect, alongside one another, in an intimate entanglement. Through the animal, the intimate entanglements of social science research – where people have an opportunity to intermittently be alongside one another, people who wouldn't normally be alongside one another – come to the fore as a site where compassion can move one in unexpected ways.

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## Note

1. On the ways in which farm animals are also often understood as a mass, arising as individuals at particular moments that are generally linked to when an animal is killed, see Buller (2013).

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## Author biography

Carrie Frieze's research is in medical sociology and science and technology studies, with a focus on reproduction across humans and animals. Her initial research focused on the use of assisted

reproductive technologies for human reproduction in the context of infertility, with a particular focus on ageing and motherhood. She went on to explore the development of cloning for endangered species preservation in zoos, and how notions of nature are being innovated in and through biotechnological development. Based on this research, Carrie has written and given talks on the ethics of de-extinction. She currently holds a Wellcome Trust New Investigator Award for the project 'Care as Science: The Role of Animal Husbandry in Translational Medicine'. This five-year project (2015–2019) uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to ask why scientists understand quality animal care as a scientific priority and how this shapes their work. She has also written and taught workshops on situational analysis and grounded theory, and has a general interest in relational research methods.