

Neighbouring as an Occasioned Activity

“Finding a Lost Cat”

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To illustrate the decline in a strong sense of community the characteristics of suburban living are often cited by social and cultural commentators. Spatially dispersed, lifeless during the daytime due to commuting, an excessive concern with keeping up appearances in terms of lawns, flowerbeds, and property maintenance, suburbia suffers perhaps worst of all from weak social relations between residents. Such disparaging commentary is frequently a premise for social scientists to define their version of “the good community,” bemoan its absence or decline, and has little concern for the phenomena of daily life in suburbia. In its concern to advance one or another political agenda conventional stipulative studies miss just how suburban residents organise their everyday lives at ground level. Drawing on the insights of ethnomethodology and other studies of social practice we proffer an alternative approach to the study of community and its moral and spatially implicated organisation. From our ethnographic fieldwork in a UK suburb we show, via the incident of the search for a lost cat, how everyday talk formulates places and is formulated by its location in the ongoing occasioned activities of neighbours.

People in the suburbs live in a world characterised by nonviolence and nonconfrontation in which civility prevails and disturbances of the peace are uncommon. In this sense, suburbia is a model of the social order. The order is not born, however, of conditions widely perceived to generate social harmony. It does not arise from intimacy and connectedness, but rather from some of the very things more often presumed to bring about conflict and violence—transiency, fragmentation,

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isolation, atomization, and indifference among people. The suburbs lack social cohesion but they are free of strife. They are, so to speak, disorganized and orderly at the same time.

—Baumgartner (1988, p. 134)

Definitions of the good community, requirements for the good community, the loss of a sense of community, and the new places we find community are the stock in trade of regional, urban, and of course, community studies. It is a perennial research topic and an important one (Bryson & Thompson, 1972; Gans, 1962; Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Morris, 1988; Nancy, 1991; Rose et al., 1965; Seeley, Sim, & Loosley, 1963; Stacey, 1960; Suttles, 1968; Tonnies, 1887/1995; Webber, 1964; Whyte, 1943; Wirth, 1933). Alongside research on community, a great deal of effort is devoted to developing good communities, investing in them, planning their spatial arrangement, drafting policy that will encourage them, selecting their housing types, and to some extent attempting to select their inhabitants. Indeed, this article arises out of a substantial research programme—The Connected Community—by the European Commission into new forms of information and communication technologies that could support local communities. Worries about the placelessness of, particularly, the Internet prompted a call for the development of technologies that would encourage proximate groups to strengthen their sense of community. In The Living Memory Project, this was translated into the ongoing design and specification of a system that would fit into the everyday lives of the residents of a suburban city neighbourhood (for more detail see Laurier et al., 2000).

Within the suburban residential area (Corstorphine), which our project delimited by postal district, there were numerous “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) rather than any unified entity that could be identified as *the* community. It was not that we expected to be able to define or identify the local community for more than our own practical purposes, because in keeping with the praxeological approach that we will advance later, it is the spatial and temporal arrangement of practices that lead to the forming of communities (Thrift, 1999). Given that spatially proximate residence was bound to our project’s definition of community members, one of the most salient categories we selected to investigate was that of residents’ being neighbours. Or rather, once again given our social practice approach, we were interested not solely in what a neighbour is for another neighbour but furthermore in describing how neighbouring as a sociomaterial practice occurs as “relations in public” (Goffman, 1963, 1971).

In accord with the guiding policies of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, the good constraint we imposed on our observations of suburbia and neighbours’ relations was to, as best we could, explicate the relevant observables for neighbours as neighbours and not for us as professional researchers and/or social theorists (Coulter, 2001; Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Sacks, 1963; Schegloff, 1999). In the material that follows, then, we will first introduce the ethnographic studies of suburbia and the elements of their work that we have drawn on in our own. In this first part, we simultaneously introduce summaries from our generalisable conventional social science results, which show similarities to the North American and Australian case studies. In our second part, we provide a sample of our ethnographic empirical material, and through and by its close description and explication, we aim to show methods, cats, ways of talking, pointing, and so on to be reflexively tied to the spatial organisation of suburbia. Building on descriptions made available by conversation analysis and eth-

nomethodology, we show some seen but unnoticed features of neighbouring by way of contrast, and as an alternate, to the usual suspects, which are ushered into view by many community studies, including our own.

Just what it is that community consists of we will not attempt to formulate here, but we will in our concluding remarks offer some respecification of Baumgartner's (1988) incisive study of the minimal morality amongst suburban neighbours. Her study, whilst grasping so much of what suburban neighbours' morals consist of, pursued for reasons of the morality of her own inquiry a stipulative and invidious account of the moral failings of suburbia. The moral failings that Baumgartner constructed miss the moral criteria by which neighbours find one another's actions to be uncaring, generous, abusive, considerate, and so forth. Our study, whilst risking appearing indifferent to what the good community might be like, is committed to bringing to analysts' attention what ordinary, spatially implicated methods neighbours use to display and recognise one another's action as morally informed.

Part 1—Community and Suburbia: Ethnographic Studies

What came as something of a surprise when we embarked on our ethnographic study was how little recent work there had been of this kind on suburbs (though see Dorst, 1989; Jackson, 1985; Oliver, Davis, & Bentley, 1994; Revill, 1993; Silverstone, 1997; Webster, 2000). The most renowned urban ethnographies were of inner-city neighbourhoods, such as, in the United States, W. F. Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society* and, in the United Kingdom, Young and Wilmott's (1986) *Family and Kinship in East London* (a later study is Tebbutt, 1995). Alongside the urban portraits, there are numerous anthropologically based studies of villages and other "small communities" (i.e., Vidich & Bensman, 1958). Indeed Erving Goffman's (1956) first major work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, came out of a study of a small settlement on a Scottish Island. Nevertheless, there have been a handful of excellent studies of suburbia, though none of them are very contemporary. In this section, we will review two studies briefly whilst initiating our project's description of suburban community practices, which shared many of the same conclusions though it ultimately takes them in a different direction.

Herbert Gans's (1967) classic study of suburbia, *The Levittowners*, was a well-received sequel to his earlier study, *The Urban Villagers* (of an inner-city Italian American neighbourhood) (Gans, 1962). *The Levittowners* was based on Gans's residence in Levittown, where he carried out a long-term participant-observation study during the years when the houses were newly built and being occupied for the first time. This early settlement period provided special circumstances that allowed neighbours to circumnavigate the fact that

most people need an excuse to meet each other. The intrepid and extrovert few can go up and introduce themselves, but for most people such a frontal assault, with its tacit admission of loneliness and the possibility of being rejected, is impossible. (Gans, 1972, p. 46)

Gans (1972) then added that "since everyone was dying of curiosity" (p. 46), methods were used for "breaking the isolation" (p. 46). People went out on their front

lawns either to play with their children or to do some gardening for what he described as the “covert” purpose of meeting their neighbours. They also walked up and down the street with their children to exchange greetings with the other new arrivals. He described the small talk that was indulged in by the new arrivals to make available to one another the salient facts about themselves and their neighbours such as their job, religion, racial attitudes, level of education, and so on. For instance, during Gans’s first conversation with his next-door neighbour, each made it clear that they did not share the same ideas about race or religion: “Disagreements would surely come up about race and religion, and if we were to be good neighbours, these subjects should not be discussed” (p. 47).

There is a sequentiality in the events that may (or may not) build bonds between neighbours that Gans (1972) alerts us to. What happens after these first meetings, with their established topics of jobs, religion, and so on, is dependent on what occurred in the first meeting, invitations would (or would not) follow to visit one another’s houses for coffee or perhaps a house party, card games, or home sales (i.e., Tupperware sort of occasions—see Clarke, 1997). In our 2-year field study of Corstorphine, we found a similar pattern of newly arrived neighbours’ being invited after on-the-street greetings and conversations during which initial assessments are made by both parties. New neighbours were then, in the particular street we studied in detail, invited by established neighbours for early-evening cocktail parties. What was important about these early-evening events was that they allowed for a low-pressure introduction of new neighbours, which was welcoming without being intrusive: a get-together where neighbours could still easily get out if they did not get on, where subjects that could be discussed were divided from the ones that should not be discussed. For Levittown and for Corstorphine, it is not just cocktail parties of course; charity events, neighbourhood meetings, and seasonal parties (i.e., 4th of July, Guy Fawkes, Halloween) were all follow-ons from initial encounters with neighbours. However, as Gans learnt, “as a rule, large gatherings needed another rationale so as to leave enough social distance between potentially incompatible people” (p. 47). What Gans provided, and what our fieldwork lead us to share, is a first formulation of neighbouring:

1. Bringing new residents together whilst allowing them to mark social distances, shared interests, and conversational mentionables and unmentionables. New neighbours in suburbia can expect to be invited to introductory parties or offer them themselves. There should be no assumption on either side that these will lead to immediate or deep friendships and may be as much about setting boundaries of acceptable behaviours (i.e., subtle warnings about religious practices, allowing dogs to stray, painting houses unacceptable colours, having loud parties, and so forth (see also below).

In Levittown, familiar get-togethers of the American suburbs were quickly instituted—bridge clubs and coffee klatsches. Similar kinds of gatherings were common in Corstorphine, particularly “coffee-mornings,” which were often on a weekly or fortnightly basis, with up to a dozen neighbours, predominantly women, attending on and off. Sometimes these informal associations had persisted for more than two decades. Gans (1972) paid attention to the less obvious communal facets of suburbia, such as rules about the appearance of front lawns:

The front lawn would be cared for conscientiously, but the backyard was of less importance. Those who deviated from this norm—either by neglecting their lawn or working

on it too industriously—were brought into line through wisecracks. When I, in a burst of compulsive concern, worked very hard on my lawn at the start, one of my neighbours laughed and said he would have to move out if I was going to have “that fancy a lawn.” (p. 48)

Picking up on Whyte’s (1943) opening quote, Gans’s (1972) episode described above, and our project informants’ remarks, a second formulation we would offer of neighbouring is the following:

2. Maintain your property in a similar state to those of your neighbours. Nonconformism in terms of excessive displays of individual and/or quirky taste, displays of wealth, or allowing property to fall into disrepair will lead to comments or worse from other neighbours. Keeping up with the Joneses, as this ethos of neighbouring is usually called, carries the sense of a mild or sometimes comical competitiveness, yet it is also about not falling too far behind nor indeed ever racing ahead of the Joneses.

During our fieldwork, especially in the summertime, we were often welcomed in the front garden, and we would pay compliments on whatever flowers were blooming or note that weeding or pruning had been done. Unlike Gans (1972), in Levittown, we did not actually purchase a property in Corstorphine; our claim to being local was based on our research project’s ties through various activities to this particular neighbourhood, living in the same city, and moreover our university buildings’ being located in the district and being one of its resources (for employment, sports facilities, night classes, taxation, and meeting rooms). Our role as social researchers was much more overt than Gans’s identity had been in Levittown, yet we were also clear about the fact that we wished to make ourselves part of the local scene to the greatest extent possible and that we wanted to participate in community activities like everyone else from the area. For example, we assisted in organising annual fayres, walked and shopped regularly on the main street, visited the local shopping mall, became regulars at a local pub and a café, used the public library, assisted at the local primary schools, attended Burn’s suppers organised by a local charity, ran a local newsletter, made acquaintances with people on the basis of their residence in the neighbourhood, and more.

On that basis, we were settled into the neighbourhood as residents without residence (or rather with our workplace as our local address). As part of our introduction as new members-in-kind of the neighbourhood, we were invited by “compatible people” for drinks in the back garden on sunny evenings and at a later stage in two cases for elaborate meals inside neighbours’ houses.¹ In the study-site street where we did our most in-depth work, the intensifying of our relationships happened gradually through visiting two households on numerous occasions (for a similar methodology, see Miller, 1998). On our first visits, we administered a questionnaire; later, we visited for longer interviews; then helped with Internet access, e-mail, and Web page design from home; and finally visited regularly as a social call. Echoing Gans’s (1972) remarks about the shift from first meetings for neighbours to the growth of bonds based on shared interests, once we had established acquaintanceships with two key households, we were then offered introductions to a wider network of neighbours who might be interested in, or interesting for, our research.² This led us to codify a further rule of neighbouring:

3. Wherever it is acceptable, pass your neighbours on to other neighbours or acquaintances, especially if they are seeking help. Amongst neighbours, there was a level of mu-

tual awareness of what each did for a job and also their major hobbies. If new resident Mr. X was looking for a tennis partner, then Ms. Y would pass him onto Mr. Z, who she knew was a keen tennis player also.

The most recent studies of suburban life have come out of Australia (Bryson & Thompson, 1972; Ferber, Healy, & McAuliffe, 1994; Johnson, 1994), perhaps the best of which is Richards (1990), and hers is the second study we are turning to. Like Gans (1972), she picks up on the maligned homogeneity of the suburb, although in her case with the intention of upholding it (for work on a multiethnic suburb see Baumann, 1996). Following the categorisations of the social sciences, she looks at how class, racism, and patriarchal structures are manifest in the suburb she studied. However, from a feminist standpoint, whilst launching a critique against the previously mentioned aspects of suburban life, on neighbouring specifically she makes a strong plea for reassessing its importance, arguing that it has been downplayed in studies of community because of its association with women: "Perhaps the clearest result of the failure to examine a range of social and ideological contexts is the assumption that neighbouring offers default relationships for those—and only those—unable to do better" (Richards, 1990, p. 182).

Whilst we would certainly agree that what neighbouring actually consists of has been overlooked, it is not only due to its strong link with the working, caring, and neighbourly lives of women, a theme we will expand on in Part 2. Richards (1990) continued, "It denigrates daytime relations between women as silly, time-filling trivia.... The assumption that neighbouring is a residual relationship has also helped confirm the myth that neighbouring is irrelevant to men" (p. 182). Clearly not all studies, and particularly ethnographic studies, are quite so denigrating toward daytime relations between women (and men). Gans's (1972) study of Levittown, as we have noted above, pays considerable attention to daytime neighbouring as it is done by women, men, and equally as significantly, by children. Without doubt though, Richards has dug into the relations of neighbouring in greater detail than Gans attempted to do. From her fieldwork, she built up a typology of neighbours (i.e., family lifers, the local jokers, good neighbours, functional friends, the triers, the distance keepers) and their associated activities (Richards, 1990, pp. 203-212). From her typologies, Richards claimed that "community" is infrequently associated with neighbourhood relations, as is "friendship."

Richards (1990) began to complicate what we might understand by neighbouring as a social scientist's concept, theory, or ideal type when she started listing some of the actual activities neighbours did for one another as good neighbours (pp. 220-240). Once again, the list of activities here is one that we also found in our ethnographic work, but rather than put our exhaustive list from Corstorphine forward as original (as in new) results, we will use Richards's concise and original list (as in the one that was the origin from which ours began):

Having one another around for barbecues,
 Bringing in the neighbour's washing for them when it starts raining,
 Bringing rubbish bins in to avoid them being blown away,
 Picking up the mail for you,
 Helping with heavy garden jobs such as erecting a shed,
 Lending electricity/hot water during an emergency (i.e., utilities failure),
 Looking after kids,

Feeding pets and/or watering plants whilst neighbour is away, and
Top of the list of neighbouring activities was **housewatching**.

Neighbours of course do not only find one another helpful, as Richards (1990), like many other studies (especially Baumgartner, 1988), pointed out, they can also be nuisances, what could be called bad neighbours. Richards produced an equally specific list from her suburbanites:

Disputes over broken fences/walls,
Dogs that were out of control,
Decaying cars on the street,
Loud parties at antisocial hours, and
Snooping on one another (as the negative aspect of housewatching).

From interviews with residents of an affluent New York suburb, Baumgartner (1988) gathered remarkable narratives of grievances, annoyances, and often quite bizarre behaviour. In one anecdote, a family told of how they avoided confronting their neighbour and questioned his sanity. Amongst other provocations, he threw stones at their window to catch their attention before dancing naked on his lawn and defecated outdoors in full view of his neighbour's children. He posed an interesting case for our fourth and important formulation of neighbouring, which is

4. Watch the neighbours and the neighbourhood. Much like properly maintaining property without either being a show off or an eyesore, this rule of thumb is balanced between being reasonably aware of what neighbours are doing—knowing your neighbours and being a nosy neighbour. It is a mutual and reflexive watchfulness in the sense that residents are aware that certain aspects of what they do can be seen by their neighbours. Also, watchfulness may be unevenly distributed, with the housebound elderly being expected to be more watchful and sometimes resented for being so and children, pets, and other possessions as appropriate items to watch (see third section).

We have summarised four rules so far and would suggest that there are probably more that could be formulated. There is a fifth rule for neighbouring, which stands out and was a commonplace point of heated discussion amongst the neighbours in Corstorphine and in our interviews and conversations with them:

5. Do not intrude on your neighbours. Living in proximity to one another means that neighbours have the possibility of calling around too frequently, of commenting more than they should on each other's lives as they see and hear them happening over the fence, through the wall or hedge, or out in the street. Even neighbours who were friends had to be careful to avoid seeing too much of one another, and most neighbours, as you would expect, were just neighbours.

Richards (1990) reiterated this attribution with a well-turned phrase at the close of her analysis of what neighbours do for one another as neighbours:

The strongest message is that neighbour relations are normally not close. Those who have close relations find them elsewhere, those who know their near neighbours best know them very little. In each of the different types . . . a good neighbour is at a distance, "not one that pops in every five seconds," in Grace's words, not "on your doorstep all the time," in Keith's. (p. 215)

The five rules that we have formulated here are ones that settled members of Australian, European, and American suburbs can be expected to know in common as suburbanites. How they deal with these general rules in practice is quite a different matter. Our gradual progression in this part of our article has been from the generalities and easy equation of neighbourliness and community via the two exemplary ethnographies by Gans (1972) and by Richards (1990) to the specifics of what neighbouring actually consists of as it is indicated in the lists that we have compiled from Richards. Why the specific details of neighbouring are worth turning to learn about, how its moral order works as a situated or occasioned activity, is a question we will address in the next section as we turn toward language and social practice in neighbouring. Paralleling our shift toward the actualities of neighbouring, we have also remarked very briefly that the residents acting as neighbours have rules to follow.

Lost Cats: The Moral Accountability of Being a Neighbour and the Visibility Arrangements of a Neighbourhood

As we set out in the second part, in common with Gans (1972) and Richards (1990), our finding was that one of the key guides in good neighbouring for suburban residents was not to intrude on your neighbours. Relatedly, we can see that for contemporary city dwellers, the general warning issued at childhood is “don’t talk to strangers,” and for sociologists and urban geographers, the avoidance of contact with strangers, creating the “lonely crowd,” is taken to be the typifying and alienating experience of modern urban life. Furthermore, its explanation is sought in general abstract relations such as fear of the other, the commodification of public spaces, minimalism, or a little more concretely in the design of pavements. Yet all of this relies on retaining the type *stranger* as if it were used as ubiquitously and reductively in ordinary interactions as it is by social theorists. The massively apparent fact is that people in cities do talk to one another as customers and shopkeepers, passengers and cabdrivers, members of a bus queue, regulars at cafes and bars, tourists and locals, beggars and by-passers, Celtic fans, smokers looking for a light, and of course in this case, as neighbours. However, each kind of talk-in-interaction has its particular further expectations, rights, limitations, and obligations as to what people can say and do for (and to) one another according to their contingently assigned social category (i.e., customer, passenger in a taxi, neighbour, etc.).

For neighbours, then, we should not start with the problem of their having to break through the fact that they are strangers to one another or even with the idea that suburbia renders them straightforwardly anonymous. Nor should we assume that neighbours are dying to form close and caring bonds with another and are simply kept apart by badly planned street layouts, lack of public fora, and impenetrable leylandi or laurel hedges and that given the right arrangement they will do so. We know already from the accounts of good neighbouring gathered by Gans (1972), Richards (1990), and us that there are rules that provide organisational features to neighbouring. Our interest is with an occasion in hand that demonstrably does provide justification for one neighbour talking to one or more of his or her neighbours. Furthermore, our concern is with just how the approaching is done by one neighbour and how other neighbours allow themselves to be approached. To foreshadow some of what we will relate in this section, when a certain kind of event occurs in a neighbourhood—it may be a leaky waterpipe flooding the street, a person accidentally dropping his or her groceries, a pet

being run over or lost, or new neighbours moving into their house—there is what we might call a potential integrative event (Sacks, 1992b, p. 194). It is available because it happens in a publicly witnessable way in this particular neighbourhood, and therefore it has relevance to the residents there at that time (and for various other acquaintances besides).

From the outset of our research project, we were in pursuit of lost cats and means by which they were sometimes found again. Investigating the part that an animal plays in suburbia might seem a little strange (but see Philo, 1995; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). The reason lost cats should be a focus of our investigation was that during the start up of the Living Memory research, Irene McWilliam suggested the example, and it was agreed by the multidisciplinary team that it was a good instance of the kind of everyday problem in a neighbourhood that a high-technology-distributed system should be able to assist in solving. A Living Memory system, as a form of a networked electronic database with public and private interfaces and software agents, would record lost items of various kinds. It could be consulted by residents who had found lost items, and its “agents” would attempt to match the losers’ and finders’ items. We will not concern readers any further with the technical aspects of the system (but see Mamdani, Pitt, & Stathis, 1999) and simply once again note that our ethnographic task was to report on how cats that got lost in suburbia were actually searched for and sometimes found. As we have hinted already, searching for a lost cat was an occasion for neighbouring through which many of the activities neighbours expectably do for another were displayed along with the moral expectations incumbent on a person as a neighbour. There were many stories about losing and finding cats that we heard during our fieldwork, and we came across a couple of cases as they happened.³ In this part of our article, we will sift through a selection of the events surrounding Jack (see Figure 1) as they were sequentially organised and use them to explicate how neighbours treat one another as neighbours with moral obligations toward one another and expectations of knowing the neighbourhood.

We have organised the events in a series of vignettes, and it should be noted by readers that the vignettes draw on the observations, events, and insights from several lost cat episodes.

VIGNETTE 1—TUESDAY EVENING

After failing to appear for 48 hours, Jack’s owners, Christine and Peter Winning, became worried. His movements in and out of their house were fairly regular, and although he sometimes did not come in all day or all night, he was seldom gone for as long as 24 hours. The same evening, while Peter was out clipping their straggling clematis hedge, Mrs. Munro, their next-door neighbour, walked by and stopped to say hello. After their greetings were finished, Peter asked, “You don’t remember when you last saw our cat by any chance do you?” Mrs. Munro said she wasn’t sure but she’d ask her husband.

Neighbours are not all of exactly the same kind, and that they are not is, of course, an issue picked up by Whyte (1960), Gans (1972), and Richards (1990) in their studies of suburbia. However, the typifying we would like bring out is the one in use by members in the course of their actions and not one that might serve the construction of typifications for the purposes of social scientists’ generalisations. In this case, it is Peter asking his next-door neighbour Mrs. Munro when she had last seen his cat. From the beginning of their interactions, Peter and Mrs. Munro’s mutual orientation

has been toward this status. They are next-door neighbours of a certain kind because like most of the semidetached residences on Chapel Street, they share an interior wall, allowing them to hear one another to a limited extent inside adjacent rooms in each



HAVE YOU SEEN JACK?

Jack is our two year old neutered ginger tom cat who is missing from home. He is wearing a blue tartan collar with a bell and he has distinctive ginger markings and white on his chest and on his paws. He is micro-chipped so he can be scanned to identify his owners. Please let us know if you see him. REWARD for his safe return.

Figure 1. Missing Cat Notice Found Attached to Lamppost in Corstorphine

of their houses. Their front doors are closer to one another than that of their fully detached neighbours; as a result, they often find themselves greeting one another while entering or leaving their houses (see Figure 2). Time spent by both parties in their front gardens, where Peter is pruning his hedge in the vignette, further increases the chances of their making small talk with one another (of the kind remarked on by Gans).

By facing onto the street, not only does a front garden show to other neighbours, without possibility of hiding, the level of its maintenance, but it also provides a spot where a homeowner can legitimately watch and/or greet passersby in the street and vice versa. Peter and Christine, whilst in their front garden, intermittently see Mrs. Munro when she is coincidentally pruning her roses and, more often, as she comes and goes with her shopping or her grandchildren and to and from church on Sunday. In fact, without intending to, Peter and Christine and Mrs. Munro will meet one another usually two or three times a week. What we have then in this aspect of their spatial arrangement is a device that regularly places neighbours in a situation where they ought to at least do a greeting yet do not necessarily have an intended topic of talk in their interaction beyond that because they do not meet one another with a reason for calling (see below). Most of the time, then, they use the kinds of topics that do not build any specific sort of relations between the conversants—in other words, items that anyone could talk about almost any time, such as the weather. Every once in a while, they deliver items that specify their relation to one another as neighbours, such as, in this case, Jack's absence, an event for which Mrs. Munro has expectably something to offer in response.

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Spatial organisation is still more deeply involved in the actions, language, and sense of their lives as neighbours than offering them the opportunity to make small talk or the challenge of evading one another. For example, Mrs. Munro spends a great deal of time in the summer tending her roses whilst also attending to the movements of the street. People who walk off the street, up the Winnings's path, and ring their doorbell are seen by their sequenced actions by Mrs. Munro to be callers. We might note here that such a categorisation's criteria will not be fulfilled if the candidate callers do not actually go to the door and knock or ring. Indeed, Mrs. Munro would justifiably become suspicious wondering whether nonknockers were burglars, door-to-door salespeople, or lost people. In doing what they do, from the moment they walk up the garden path, these strangers are seen as callers at the Winnings's. They display their actions as such, and Mrs. Munro sees them as such. It is thus no mystery to either party what Mrs. Munro means when she responds to their action by saying quite loudly to these callers, "I saw them go out earlier in their car." Tending her roses, Mrs. Munro



Figure 2. Suburban Semidetached House, Showing the Next-Door-Neighbour Arrangement With Close Parallel Paths to Front Doors

can in turn be appropriately categorised by the callers as the Winnings's next-door neighbour, more so when she offers her information. As a next-door neighbour, she is entitled to monitor any callers' movements (rule: good neighbours watch over their neighbours' property, particularly when they are out) and provide a formulation of their actions when she calls out, "I saw them. . . ."

We could put this more strongly: A neighbourhood does not simply comprise of the locals and then outsiders; neighbours generally use much more fine-grained typifications (i.e., other homeowners who live on the same street, neighbours' children, callers, refuse collectors, dog walkers, etc.) (Watson, 1993). Peter and Mrs. Munro have special obligations and awareness of one another as next-door neighbours (see Figure 2). Not only does Mrs. Munro watch over their property, and they hers, but in the vignette we are suggesting that Mrs. Munro will be the first person the Winnings turn to having lost their cat. For other problems, such as their home computer's breaking down or Peter's losing his job, they might turn to someone else. Losing a cat, though, is an occasion for turning first to your next-door neighbour (unless he or she hates cats⁴).

Another way of putting this is that it is only certain problems that sensibly and morally predicate assistance from a neighbour, this is primarily because of the neighbour's obligations as a neighbour. A friend might calm your anxiety or offer consolation over the loss of your cat, but you would not ask him or her where and when they saw it last (unless he or she also happened to be your neighbour). Equally, whilst Mrs.

Munro does offer a degree of consolation to Peter, she does this as a neighbour displaying friendliness and not as a friend from next door. The criteria by which we can judge a neighbour to be a good neighbour are not those that we would apply to a friend being a good friend. It makes sense to say of a good neighbour that he or she is friendly and of a bad one that he or she is unfriendly. However, it is confusing to say of a good friend that he or she is friendly or even neighbourly. In passing, we might note that Christine and Peter may well spend more time on a minute-by-minute basis in conversation with their good neighbour Mrs. Munro than they do with many of their good friends. Monitoring relations with neighbours and friends is done by different criteria. The actual encounters in which relations are made manifest require skilful management, and we have noted already they are in various ways neither determined by nor cut loose from, but are definitely implicated in, the on-the-ground spatial arrangements of neighbourhoods.

VIGNETTE 2—WEDNESDAY EVENING

After another day of Jack's failing to arrive at the door or on a windowsill, the Winnings started calling at the doors of the neighbours they knew as acquaintances, which was all of their immediate front-door neighbours. Kim the general practitioner's wife from one house over, with a different view onto the back gardens, suggested that they call at a house that backed diagonally onto the Winnings. From her upstairs study, she had seen Jack sitting on its conservatory doorstep, sleeping on the inside of the windowsill a couple of times, and being ushered out by the old woman who lived there.

In this second vignette, we rejoin the search for Jack as the Winnings widen their net to include the next level of neighbours. In following their search, we are finding the distinctions they make between their neighbours. This next level is neighbours they have also at one or another time introduced themselves to by attending a cocktail party, through talking to them in the street, or, of particular relevance with Kim, through cat-related activities. Kim, like Mrs. Munro, is a person connected to them by Jack. From when the Winnings first moved in, Kim has brought their cat back to them from her house. It is not a surprise that Jack is often found at Kim's, because she is a cat lover who has greeted and petted Jack from the beginning, has fed him frequently, and has confessed to keeping cans of tuna fish in the cupboard for him. On this basis, they have asked her a few times to feed and look after Jack while they have been away on holiday (a neighbouring activity noted by Richards, 1990, in her studies in Australia). Other neighbours ignore him and still others who positively dislike cats have thrown jugs of water at him to discourage him from coming to their doors and windows.

A further thing we learn from these first two vignettes is that each neighbour observes Jack's life from a slightly different perspective in terms of timings and the visibility arrangements of the neighbourhood. There is no overview of Jack's movements for any other residents, and seeing is distributed unevenly amongst the residents (Goodwin, 1997). Who can see various goings-on is inequitable because of the architecture of the neighbourhood—so Kim has a good view of Jack's visits when the Winnings do not—but also according to the time spent watching. Yet seeing is further organised according to what it is that neighbours watch out of their windows, where some neighbours may not be interested in cats at all. Even for the non-feline inclined, part of the visual attraction of cats is that they can be stared at without fear of accusations of snooping or spying. They thus provide proper objects for idle attention when neighbours look out into one another's back gardens. As a result, neighbours

may be able to provide a great deal more detail on the life of one another's pets than on the human residents, even if they claim little love of cats or dogs.

VIGNETTE 3—THURSDAY

When Peter Winning called at the door of the old woman's house, he immediately introduced himself as her neighbour Peter whilst also pointing to his back garden ("I live just there") and then quickly added that he was the owner of a ginger tomcat who, he was pretty sure, visited this house.

In response, the woman introduced herself as Moira. "Yes, your cat comes around quite a lot. I call him Tom the tom."

Peter asked if she'd seen him recently, to which she replied that she hadn't seen him for a couple of days. After this, Moira apologised for inviting the Winnings's cat into her house, but Peter reassured her that they didn't mind, adding that it was in a cat's nature to be disloyal and that he liked the fact that they made friends with the neighbours. Moira went on to add further justification to her having Tom to visit, saying that she was a cat lover and had had many in the past but was too old herself now to take on a kitten.

Conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists have devoted a great deal of attention to the sequential orderliness of telephone talk. A notable feature of phone conversations is that a caller has, with very few exceptions, a reason for calling, which he or she will work up to in various ways and which the person called justifiably expects to come up to at some point (Sacks, 1992a). Calling at people's doors historically preceded calling at their house via the phone, and it is unsurprising that neighbours who receive a knock at the door from another neighbour also have the expectancy that their neighbour has a reason for calling, more especially if they were previously unacquainted as Peter and Moira are. Before Peter formulates his reason for calling, he has to make his identity as a neighbour available to Moira.

Just how he locates himself and how he uses "what any competent neighbour should know" of other neighbours is something we will try and explicate here. Giving his first name—Peter—is not an insignificant matter, but it is his formulation of their common membership—"I'm your neighbour"—that is the identification that has the most significant consequences for Moira's obligations toward him. It's not a phrase that he would have to use were he pruning his hedge, nor is it an identification Moira has to use either, because answering the door is contextualisation enough.

When ethnomethodologists criticise many other treatments of language, it is often over their attempts to remedy the indexical nature of language when it needs none, and to do so is to risk making nonsense of what is said, written, or otherwise enunciated. Moira's location is clear to both parties because they are on her doorstep. Think what sense it would make for her to say, "I'm your neighbour," though she could say, "I'm not your neighbour" to introduce an explanation as to why she was answering the door of the Winnings's neighbour's house. We can see, in her nonproduction of a correction to being seen as the person who lives in the house whose door she is answering, an assignment of her membership in the community of neighbours and that it is a moral matter if she is hiding the fact that she is not actually a neighbour. Being caught being in someone else's house is the sort of happening that requires some sort of comment to control the inferencing that can follow by legitimate neighbourhood residents.

What Peter does, after making available their common membership as neighbours, is still more interesting—he points toward the back of his home, which adjoins

Moira's. It may or may not be the case that Moira has seen Peter at his windows (though it is quite a distance for being able to see facial features), gardening, or eating or drinking outdoors in the summer. At this point, Moira has not made her neighbourly perspective clear in terms of whether she has seen Peter or Christine; it may be because Peter has not given her the opportunity to do so. What he is building on, without waiting for a risky statement from Moira as to just how much of their lives she watches over, is the accepted fact that neighbours watch one another's property (and make comparisons between it and theirs). He is locating himself as a resident of that property there, with its tidy garden sharing a high boundary wall with Moira's (which is why he has never seen her in her garden—he is also downslope). This locating will be important for the reason for calling that follows and is already giving Moira warning of the pertinent facts.

Before we move on further in the search for Jack, let us consider a moment longer the neighbourly awareness that Peter's pointing is part of. It is the mutual awareness residents have of their suburban street and block that they regard house by house, garden by garden, every day accumulating an ongoing sense of which houses and gardens are well kept, showy, gnome owners or not, for sale or uninhabited. These are the observable aspects of their neighbours, the neighbours themselves are, by comparison, seldom observed in situ. In fact, two neighbours could know a great deal about one another despite never having seen one another's faces (what car they drive, how often they entertain, whether they play a musical instrument, whether they have children, what time they normally go to bed, etc.). In this case, Moira is more likely to know that the ginger tom belongs to the house behind her than that Peter does. As Peter points, he is not putting a name to a face; he is putting a face and a name to a familiar and well-known property. In this way, he is orienting to the mutuality of perspectives that unacquainted neighbours should have and no more.

Having prepared the way for his inquiry, Peter then learns a little more about Jack's travels without as yet finding out where he is now. Peter and Christine had already assumed that Jack has more acquaintances among the neighbours than they do. We can also note here that even Jack does not act simply on propinquity; his visiting is a mutual arrangement. Moira, like Kim, befriended him and, as a retired, elderly, currently catless cat lover, she was nearly always there to let him indoors and have a ready stock of the food and other comforts that would bring him back again.

VIGNETTE 4—THURSDAY LATER

Mrs. Munro knocked at the Winnings's door. "Have you found Jack yet?" Christine said that she and Peter hadn't. Mrs. Munro continued, "Alec says the last time he saw Jack was around the front of the house on Monday waiting to be let in." Christine thanked her, saying that Jack had been in the house that night but that was the last time they had seen him. They then had a lengthy conversation about what they might do next. They had already phoned the cat homes and the refuse collection company (which keeps a record of dead animals found). They would try a notice in the shop windows, the vet's, and the supermarket.

In this vignette, we would like to draw attention to the fact that reason for calling applies as equally to next-door neighbours as any other. Mrs. Munro's reason is to pass on her watchful husband Alec's report as requested a day earlier by Peter. By calling at doors and meeting in their street, the conversational topic can be strung out over several days and different locations, which is one way that talk mundanely extends itself and that neighbours have an integrative event that justifies more than a neighbourly

greeting without having to venture into inquiries that are too personal. By having a legitimate reason for calling, Mrs. Munro is also working with the good neighbouring rule not to always be on her neighbour's doorstep; she is there as a response to their request for help. The request for help is a time-bound entity, and there will come a future point when the search for Jack peters out and Mrs. Munro can no longer easily raise the topic as her reason for being on their doorstep.

Mrs. Munro has also consistently used the doorstep for purposes beyond updates on Jack's status—she stays on it and refuses to budge until a conversation is over and signals a conversation is over when she does budge. When they first moved in, the Winnings often asked her to come inside their house, but she would decline their offers by various means. Through her repeated declining, the Winnings learnt how and where it was going to be between themselves and Mrs. Munro. By staying on the doorstep, Mrs. Munro controls the kind of encounter they have—she stops it leading to offers of cups of tea and biscuits (in that she is not just being polite but has made it practically inconvenient for Christine to pour her a cup of tea). There is a shared sense also of the appropriate time conversations on the doorstep can run on in this suburban street (which is, as it happens, surprisingly long). By keeping her footing at the threshold, Mrs. Munro skillfully manages several aspects of the conversations—in so doing, she is giving the language a context. Not only is she doing that kind of social work; she is also, without having to take time out to explicitly formulate what is going on and could go on in this encounter, by her locating of the talk, making it the kind of conversation that neighbours can have at their front door. In this way, she artfully manages the maintenance of appropriate distance between herself and her next-door neighbours. And as we hinted earlier, as she backs off the doorstep, even when she is still speaking, she is showing on her part a preparation to finish all that she has to say on this occasion. Seeing her backing off, her conversant can forestall the end of the conversation by adding another thing that he or she wants to speak about before coming to a mutually agreed on end of the “what the call at the door” was about.

The doorstep is not an equally shared conversational space like, say, a table in a café, because it is clearly one person's doorstep, and the other is the caller. The relation of the conversants to the doorway controls what can be done there in terms of finishing the conversation because the person who is standing in his or her doorway cannot easily back off to start closing the conversation. With an unwanted door-to-door salesperson, the homeowner could perhaps start closing the door on them to indicate they were closing the conversation too, but with the neighbour, the homeowner has to use different and fairly complex, explicit techniques to draw the conversation to a close. We might note here that the neighbour who calls on a neighbour therefore is also expected to be the one who first draws the conversation to a close.

VIGNETTE 5—SATURDAY

On the weekend, when they have some extra time, Christine and Peter put together a missing-cat notice on their personal computer, scanning a photograph and composing the text (see Figure 1). Not only did they post it in the newspaper shop, vet's, and supermarket; they also laminated it in plastic and attached copies to lampposts on the corners of the three parallel streets to theirs and the noticeboard at the edge of the local park.

Having called on the observational assistance of most of their immediate neighbours, the Winnings spread their net wider and thinner. Even in their adoration of

their cat, the Winnings retain a practical reasoned attitude to how many doors along the street they can call on before they have gone far enough in their door-to-door search for Jack. Their search as it unfolds as a first-time experience for them is shaped by Jack's movements because beyond three doors in either direction, it turns out that although the neighbours say they have seen the ginger tom at Number 5, it has never visited them nor even crossed their garden. For what is after all a time-consuming search for a working couple, this serves as sufficient reason to switch to other methods of searching. It is at this point, 5 days after Jack's disappearance, that the Winnings draft the missing-cat notice in Figure 1.

Although interpreting the text might be the exemplary discursive analysis to do, we are once again going to look at how the text is used procedurally in its setting rather than isolated lying on the desk of an academic researcher. Looking closely and rereading the missing-cat notice is the last thing residents of the neighbourhood are likely to do in the course of their everyday activities. The Winnings are attuned to the everyday habits of their residents and are aware that the first thing they have to do is to choose "relevantly and appropriately" the place to put their notice (Evergeti, 2000). Public space is not a big featureless container, as many social theories often posit it to be, but is instead massively and minutely organised. The Winnings are, just as any other competent member of a neighbourhood would be, aware of just which places missing cat notices have been and should be displayed to be found and to be seen as actual legitimate missing-cat notices: places such as the vet's, corner shops, and so forth in the neighbourhood (and not citywide, by dint of a cat's travel patterns as well as private resource limitations on bill posting) and also lampposts (see Figure 3), railings, and even bus stops. These are places known in common as publicly relevant zones (Evergeti, 2000) and are thus proper objects/surfaces at which residents and others stop and stare. They are also sought out by locals as sources of local information about planning applications, community events, clubs, voluntary organisations, night classes, and so forth.

VIGNETTE 6—MONDAY

A neighbour from across the opposite side of the street posted a note through their door saying that the new neighbours behind him had found a cat, which they handed over to the cat rescue centre (which, it later turns out, failed to match it to the Winnings's telephone description for reasons that remain mysterious to us and the Winnings). During some small talk with his neighbours whilst he was unloading his car and they were taking their baby out in its pushchair, they told him about finding a stray tomcat. "It seemed like a stray," they told us later, "because it was so desperate to get in the house. It was hungry and thin. It had no collar. And some of its hair was missing."

Our story about the Winnings's search for their missing moggy has a happy ending, with Jack's being found. There is an irony in his finding because, by the incongruity procedures of the new neighbours, Jack was found to be a stray. His recent attack of summer mites, losing his collar that day, and his lean looks were taken as evidence of his not being a neighbour's pet and thus of his being lost and/or a stray. At this point, Jack was removed from the neighbourhood entirely to the care of the cat shelter, which is in another suburb of the city.

What the new neighbours made apparent in their error is just what the settled neighbours come to know and they did not yet know. Through repeated observations of their street, its houses, gardens, hedges, and pathways, they learn which pets belong

to which properties, which children to which parents, and even which vehicles to which houses (should they be broken or bumped into or damaged by the aforementioned children). Moreover, it was once again via the fine distinction of new neighbour rather than settled neighbour that their (mistaken) actions were morally assessed by their next-door neighbour, the Winnings and Mrs. Munro (who is known for passing on her assessments of neighbours up and down the street). By their categorisation, they were seen to be genuinely mistaken rather than as potentially involved in an attempt to remove an intrusive cat from the neighbourhood. It is just such events as complaints over pets, in some cases calls to have loud dogs removed, or indeed neighbours killing one another's pets that are matters for moral conflict between neighbours as alluded to by studies other than ours.

Morality in, and as, the Ordinary Accomplishments of Neighbours

In this article, we have followed on from two of the few detailed studies of suburbia, Gans (1972) in the United States and Richards (1990) in Australia, by taking their analysis further down to ground level. We have not treated suburbia as an a priori deficient community that needs remedying nor as essentially ill conceived, and neither did Gans or Richards, both of whom sought to relieve suburbia from such critiques. On the other hand, we have not defended suburbia, because suburbanites are more than capable of doing so. We have, instead, been describing somewhat briefly what it is that suburban neighbours actually say and do, through looking at a specific event: the search for a lost cat. In concluding, we wish to turn to Baumgartner's (1988) powerful critique of suburban life in the United States to clarify in what ways, whilst making an excellent political argument, it risks obscuring the grounds of the moral judgments of suburbanites.

In suburbia...among friends and neighbours assistance is restricted to casual actions that entail few costs. Its primary form is the small favour—picking up someone else's child after school, loaning someone a cooking ingredient or borrowing detergent, shovelling



Figure 3. Laminated Street Notice Attached to Lamppost at Junction Between Two of the Busiest Streets, Near to Where Cat Was Lost

someone's snow in winter, or watering someone's house plants while its occupants are away. True sacrifices, however, are rare, particularly outside the household. (Baumgartner, 1988, p. 133)

These patterns provide a glimpse at another side of the culture of moral minimalism. People with little occasion for enmity are also unlikely to develop strong friendships. If it makes no sense to confront offenders, it correspondingly makes no sense to shower anyone with kindness. Moderation thus prevails in both positive and negative behavior alike. In this sense, weak social ties breed a general indifference and coldness, and a lack of conflict is accompanied by a lack of caring. (Baumgartner, 1998, p. 134)

In Baumgartner's argument about the cooling off of relations between neighbours in suburbia, she echoed Elias's (1939/1978) comments on the civilising process, Sennett's (1994) comments on the decline of public life in its complexity and intimacy, and ultimately the turn-of-the-century comments of Tonnies (1887/1995) on the shift in social relations that occurred as communities shifted from living in small towns and villages to cities. With the welcome growth of civility in the suburbs, where residents avoid violence and confrontation, comes a corresponding unwelcome decline of intimacy and connectedness. We can make some brief comments here that it makes sense to say of people being civil that whilst they are guided by politeness and etiquette, this thereby transforms their conduct from spontaneous or genuine shows of feeling, be they hot, cold, or icy, to this more measured conduct.

For Baumgartner (1988), as a conceptual element in her argument consequent on the applicability of *civil* to everyday life in suburbia, a "moral minimalism dominates the suburbs" (p. 127). Searching for indexes of "the civilising process" already risks losing much of what neighbours do for one another by allowing a grand historical context to descriptively control the development and forms of all communities whilst missing what those communities consist of. Furthermore, Baumgartner, in seeking comparative cases, tended toward invidious comparison whereby suburban neighbours' actions, which although moralised through and through, come to be treated as lacking moral authority or exercise by comparison with, on several occasions, anthropologists' accounts of tribal disputes and how they are settled by those present. A lack of physical aggression or public airing of disputes in favour of simple avoidance or delegations to third parties such as the police or law courts is then equated with moral minimalism. However, there is confusion here between "spectacles" of morality in action such as shouting matches, fist fights, and televised trials (Lynch & Bogen, 1996), "true sacrifices" (whatever they may be) between neighbours, and the multiple arrays of quite ordinary morally accountable and morally formulative action that goes on (e.g., as displayed in the search for a lost cat). Small favours are the lesser party to true sacrifices, but what happens if we label one neighbour's efforts for another a big favour and under what conditions might we expect a neighbour to sacrifice himself or herself for us as a neighbour? We can envisage big favours, and we can also anticipate conditions where one neighbour might sacrifice himself or herself for another, but they are exceptional circumstances (Jayyusi, 1984). Think of the sense it makes to say, "she sacrificed her career for her neighbour" in contrast to "she sacrificed her career for her husband." Yet the exceptional case can be, "she sacrificed her life saving her neighbours from their burning building." Moreover, the diversity of moral dilemmas that do face communities of (even middle-class New York suburban) neighbours are shown in Baumgartner's collected anecdotes of neighbouring complaints and disputes.

Of greater import perhaps than the use of the hierarchical contrast between true sacrifices and small favours is the disjunction between the moral authority and exercise that can be attributed legitimately to, and used accountably by, a tribal member in a village society as observed and documented in an anthropological study. Should a tribal member in that setting settle a disagreement, or make a complaint with an axe in the neck of the wrongdoer, then that may be in those specific circumstances an appropriate, locally accepted, and morally tenable method of getting justice to be done. Suburban neighbours in Edinburgh, New York, or elsewhere in Western urbanised nation-states should not be assessed by the same criterion, and to do so, as Ryle (1949) often observed, is a category error.

Rights and obligations are reflexively tied to their setting, to its members, and through their reflexive and accountable organisation. Attributions of blame, assessments of character, and senses of responsibility are specified by the category of person/institution/thing that is taken to be acting and accountable for their actions. Although in many community studies, there is an assumption of the common good that has been in decline, when the good is taken in its usage as good friend, good plumber, good cat, good lover, good party, and of course, good neighbour, then we can see that our criteria of how we shall assess good (or bad) in each case changes and remains to be settled on each and every occasion (Jayyusi, 1984). What we can also grasp is that our moral assessment sensibly varies according to who we find someone to be on any particular occasion, where the same person may be your neighbour fixing his or her car on Saturday and the priest giving a sermon on Sunday. Our morals are organised as part and parcel of the ordinary and diverse organisation of often disjunctive settings and their agents. A good neighbour in suburbia should thus be judged and understood according to the criteria given and used by an actual community of suburban neighbours and not the a priori morals or transcendental ethics of a philosopher nor the idealised or dystopian versions of community imposed by a social theorist.

Notes

1. For us, as researchers, making acquaintances with our locals was organised in a similar manner to that of any neighbours attempting to make acquaintances, so we were just as liable to being avoided as “not the kind of people I’d get on with” as anybody else and having our interests (technology research being key given our research project) assessed for their compatibility with various other residents. Indeed, following such a procedure was entirely appropriate to our ambitions. To use a census-like approach to meet all residents without exception was thereby to miss learning-through-using the natural ways in which newcomers got to know other local residents.

2. This process of being passed along from informant to informant on the basis of the ethnographer’s stated interests is often remarked on in anthropology. See, for instance, Rabinow’s (1977) highly readable story of the hidden work behind anthropological monographs in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, which later sparked off the writing world’s textual school of anthropology.

3. The fieldwork story we are sketching out merges the details of the “participant” loss of one of the ethnographer’s cats, with a number of “observer” project interviews on losing and finding cats with Corstorphine residents. In using the anonymised and amalgamated story of a missing cat, we perhaps render our research findings susceptible to being disparaged as trivial, akin to the kind of stories found in small-circulation town newspapers. It is not a story of protest, rampant conformism, money-grabbing landlords, dubious real estate deals, or indeed

the demolition of homes for an airport. Yet that is because it is an ordinary event that happens all over the place to many neighbours and is what everyday neighbourhood life consists of; it most certainly is news to the residents concerned. A second form of disparagement may come from using fieldwork stories, rather than, say, interview transcripts, as data; however, we hope that readers are sufficiently familiar with ethnographic fieldwork accounts as to find this acceptable and normal practice. If not, please consult Geertz (1988), Law (1994), Orr (1996), and Wolf (1992).

4. However, that might be an even better reason for investigating first what they have to say about your missing cat.

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