Interview with Vicky (pseudonym), pet pig keeper.

3rd February 2022, in-person at participant’s place of work.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: how long have you had your pigs?

P: they turned one in July

K: what made you want to get a pet pig?

P: You can actually hear her trying to get in through the door. So, I've been obsessed with pigs for quite some time, not sure why, I never lived on a farm or anything when I was younger, I grew upon a council estate. But ive been pretty much obsessed with pigs since forever. I really wanted one and basically managed to wear my boyfriend down after six or seven years of me asking constantly.

K: what was it about pigs in particular?

P: you know... I can't really tell you, I've just always, well i grew up on a council estate and I always wanted the countryside. My brother and I grew up exactly the same and now he lives in London and I live in the country, couldn’t be any different. So yeah, I kind of wanted a pig forever, they have been my favorite animal. wore him down and now here we are.

K: So where did you get them?  
  
P: they came from a farm [name]. you'll probably find a few people you will probably find a few people in the group that I've got pigs from there. We managed to make contact with two or three people that have got my pigs siblings. You can sort of match it up if someone says my pig is 2 today and we've had them two years, you can kind of figure it out. My boyfriend got me a day out where you can like cuddle the pigs and hang out with them for the day. After that, I just had to get one.

K: did you pick your two out specifically?

P: well, we kind of got sent a picture of the whole litter. Then we got put on our waiting list and just had to wait for them to come up. we got sort of last dibs on the litter i think, but one of the pigs I wanted was one of those two so we did really pick that one out. Then the little one was the last one kind of left with him. We always said we were gonna have two because obviously they are quite social. I wanted to have two of them. So we got brother and sister.

K: and did you get in contact with Defra?

P: yeah so, before I got then I rang up the APHA the animal health people, I rang them to make sure that I knew what I was supposed to have done. I had to get the CPH number before I would even be entertained for getting a pig, The farmer was quite hot on it they wouldn't even let you join the waiting list until you had the proper paperwork. which is fair enough. so that was the first thing i did, then i got in touch with animal health to make sure everything was as it should be. Then when I got home I had to fill out an movement form Which I had to do within 24 hours I think. Just to say that they'd been moved.

K: have they got ear tags or anything?

P: Yeah they do.

K: was that done by the farm?

P: no it was my vet who did it. the farm gave us the tags and then the first time we met the vet they did it.

K: how was the process of tagging them?

P: I didn't like it but they didn't seem that bothered.

K; why did you not like it?

P: you think it's gonna hurt them and you just don't want to see your little pets getting hurt. But they didn't really seem to care they just got on with it.

K: I guess that made you feel better?

P: It did make me feel better watching her do it. She was like “they will be fine they will be fine” and I was like “but they are so small?”

K: how small where they when you first got them

P: really quite small, when we first picked them up you could have them in one hand. Six or seven kilos and maybe 30 centimeters long. They were 10 weeks old when we got them. Really quite tiny.

K: how would you describe your relationship with them now?

P: they are just my little mates really, they follow me around. They are allowed in the house but they don't live inside. We've got a pen outside for them, I've got a very big garden. We've kind of designated the whole end of the garden as their pen. It is the size that they recommend you have if you were to leave your pig in there all the time but obviously we don't leave them in there all the time. They have Rome of the garden and the house.

K: How much of your daily routine is involved in caring for them?

P: so, I'm a shift worker so my shifts kind of change all the time. I mean I feed them twice a day, first thing in the morning and then at teatime. Sometimes that does get stressed a little bit depending on when I'm working, because my other half also works shifts. Between the two of us we try and keep it as close as we can. I've got like three or four water bowls for them dotted around the garden so if one of them runs out they've always got another one. With really basic stuff, I'd probably spend maybe half an hour a day. The rest of the time they are following me up and down the garden and wanting to get involved in everything. If I try and dig a hole, they are in there as well. They are just everywhere.

K: So, you spend quite a lot of time with them?

P: Yeah.

K: what kind of feelings do you associate with your pets?

P: I love them. I don't know, I just smile every time I talk about them. They are my little mates. it's weird when you tell people that you're going to get a pig they are like “what are you going to do with it?”. I give my reasons like we don't really have time for a dog, I work 12 hour shifts and stuff. They are here and they keep each other happy. When I'm here they do follow me around, but they have each other so when I'm not here I think they're happy. Every time I see people now, it's like “how are the pigs” no asking how my partner is or how I am, they want to know about the pigs. They fast become the biggest talking point.

K: do you have any other pets at all or is it just them?

P: no it's just them. We are going to get some ducks but that has been delayed a little bit

K: what is the relationship like between your two pigs?

P: like classic siblings really, they like each other but then they fight. So, just like me and my brother were when we were kids. They sort of chase each other around the garden full stop the boy pig is a bit bigger, so he is very much the alpha pig and he rules the roost because he is bigger. He is a bit of a bully too. Majority of the time though, they are curled up having a snooze like they are in my Conservatory right now. Pretty much typical siblings like they love each other but they will bite each other occasionally.

K: how do you think they fit into your life?

P: actually, really well, certainly in comparison to dogs. They kind of just want to do their own thing and they get a bit annoyed sometimes if you try and involve yourself. In terms of our life they do fit in quite well with our shifts because we can move their feeding windows. I do walk them but they don't necessarily need a walk, so in comparison to a standard pet like a dog they fit in so much better with us.

K: and how do you communicate with your pigs?

P: we started training them pretty early, like you would train a dog so very food based, we also taught them to ring a bell if they needed a wee. They learned that within about three weeks. Every time they look like they're gonna have a where you pick him up put him outside give him a treat and ring the bell. They learned pretty quickly that that was what they had to do. They're so food driven, I've never seen an animal as food driven as a pig. A dog will sit and wait for food as well but a pig will just go straight forward for it so you have to be quite strict with them in the beginning.

K: how's training changed the relationship you have with them?

P: probably because i did the bulk of the training, i mean my other half is involved but the bulk of the work is mine because I wanted the pigs. But I think I have established myself as kind of like the alpha pig in the pack if you know what I mean. They will always listen to me, and they do listen to my partner, but mainly me because I've done the bulk of the training with them. As much as he has to I guess it's not on the same level of intensity.

K: do you think they perceive you as the alpha pig?

P: yeah so everything i read, like online and in the pig groups, said you have to establish yourself as alpha pig well they will run rings around you. They are very clever and very stubborn and they only want to do what they want to do. If you can't get over that then they'll just give you loads and loads of grief all the time.

K: do you think they trust you?

P: yeah, I would say so. They tend to run for us if they get scared by something. there are some building work going on at the moment and if they hear a big bang, or something that Spooks them, because they are quite jumpy creatures, they will run for us. They do tend to come over and I guess feel safer with us.

K: and how do you think they fit into your family? Is it just you and your partner?

P: it is yeah, we don't have any children or anything so it's just us. So yeah they've pretty much become the kids almost I guess. I guess with a lot of people with pets but no children they just become the family don't they. We have got a big corner sofa now and now they are quite big they take up quite a lot of it and we just squeeze in on the end. So yeah they fit in quite nicely I'd say.

K: do you see them more as children or as your friends?

P: they are very much my pets if you know what I mean, I'm not really into it when people call them their fur babies or whatever, I'm not really into that. I don't know they have very quickly become part of the family because people are like “how the pigs” when they see you, so they are part of us now if you know what I mean. right all my pets but also just part of the family

K: what do you think is so special about Pigs as pets compared to other species?

P: well firstly there are a bit different and there's not too many people who have got them. Admittedly that isn't particularly why I wanted to get pigs but my other half likes that idea, like it's quite cool to have a different pet. The way they fit into our lives a lot better like with our shift working and stuff, they are quite happy to be on their own and that makes our lives easier. I'm not worrying about them at work or making them fit around me, don't get me wrong I make sure they're OK but it's not like they need me 24/7. Like even when we're in the house with them sometimes they will just clear off for like an hour. They will do whatever they want to do like just run around for a bit. So I think we enrich each other's lives, we are around when they want us to be, you know we play games with them. We will hang treats up in balls on the fence so they have to work for it. We have to keep them mentally stimulated because they are quite clever. If they get bored they will destroy everything, so we do have to keep on top of that. My aunt has border collies, it's similar because they're very active and clever dogs and if you don't keep them stimulated they will end up just eating your sofa. So I try to avoid that.

K: have they impacted your own health and well being at all?

P: mental health I'd say they would, I've had my own mental health struggles, I had quite a significant breakdown about eight years ago. As much as I've tried to get over it essentially it was all trauma from a very abusive relationship a long time ago when I was young, so that all kind of hit ahead and I went pretty mental for a year or two. I still have some off days, but you have a plan with them you know, like you have to get up, you have to go and feed them, they rely on you so you have to get up. They make me laugh all the time because they're clever and stupid at the same time, always getting themselves into mischief. So yeah, I'd say they've improved both of our lives, my partner doesn't really struggle with anything like that. It's just like, while they do your head in a lot of the time, but you get a lot of reward from them. Like if they learn something you're trying to teach them or when you are watching them chase each other around the garden. Like when they get the zoomies and run around in the middle of the night. even physical health I'd say they help. I spend a lot more time in the garden, gets me out of the house a little bit more then I would be.

K: so would you say you have an emotional connection with them?

P: I would say so. Without sounding a little bit wishy washy, they are in tune with you. so we went away for a couple of weeks, the whole time we were away my mom came over she only works in the village next to us. She made sure they were all sorted. When we came back you could sort of tell that they missed us. There was some connection where they knew we weren't here and they were a little put out by the fact we weren't here. So I think there is an emotional sort of thing there. she was really weird with us, the boy pig he was fine, we got all the happy grunts and said hello. The little one was kind of scared at us for about 24 hours, I genuinely felt that she held a grudge. I think she held a garage that we went away and left her. The most we have ever left them four was like a night or two and the neighbors checked on them. All their basic needs were met but I definitely think she had the hump because we weren't there.

K: so you think they perceive a relation to you?

P: yeah I would say so certainly from a personal experience if you know what I mean. There is definitely something there between us and the pigs.

K: what kind of way is do they demonstrate that on their part?

P: out of the two of them the girl is particularly cuddly like in the mornings I'll feed them, so then if I'm here like this morning I was sort of around. i kind of hang out downstairs the day, she will come up and rub against your leg and scratch against you. Like every morning she will come and see me and scratch up against my legs, like that is part of her routine, she does it every day. I’d say she is more in tune with humans than our other pig. Like last night,, he got up on the sofa with us and was watching telly with us, then once he has had enough he will take himself off so you can't touch him anymore. Every now and then he does want a cuddle though and he will come right up to you, put his head on your chest or whatever if he wants a proper cuddle.

K: do they have a different relationship with you and your partner?

P: to an extent yeah he is like the cool one, and I am the one with the rules. He's like the cool dad who turns up and they get extra cuddles and extra food. So I'm probably known as the authoritarian. So, in that respect yes but in of like the emotional aspect, she is obsessed with him. If she goes to lay down she wants to lie across his feet. He isn't standoffish but he doesn't really seek out cuddles as much.

K: are you actively work on building up a bond with them?

P: nowadays not so much because we're kind of here with them all the time. But at first we kept them in the pen for a couple weeks before we let them in the house. They had quite a long journey with them too to get them here, so we were stopping kind of every hour to check on them. We got them home for the first couple of weeks we thought we'd just let them do their thing and let them get settled. It's probably worth a bit of back story here as well, at [the farm] all the pigs have cuddled before they get put with their family. right because that's part of their like sort of getting them used to humans and interaction. So ever since they were born the only interaction they really had was from the workers at the farm because there was no one visiting in lockdown. So,i feel like they kind of missed out on a crucial part of their development and we thought they might be slightly different pigs in the way that they behave if they had had that. At [the farm] you could pick one up and it would be asleep in your arms within like 3 seconds. Whereas with ours they were quite skittish at first, we booked like two weeks off work when we first got them. The weather was beautiful and we were just doing what we needed to do at home, so my boyfriend was watching the cricket in the garden, we wouldn't necessarily interact with them but we would be around and in their face. When we were around then we'd have a treat in our pocket or whatever to build their rapport. We were just sat in their pen not necessarily going after them because I wanted to give them attention but just so they knew that we were there. I don't think they had as much socialization as they could have before we got them and because of that they weren't as friendly as they would have been under normal circumstances.

K: how do you think your relationship with them has changed overtime?

P: so it's definitely got better because at the start they wouldn't listen to us and they kind of just did their own thing, stubborn little piglets. whereas now,well, they know when they're doing something wrong now but it won't necessarily stop them from doing it. So as an example, they love to pull electric cables out of the wall, I've seen loads of other pigs do it too. They know they shouldn't do it but what they will do is stand directly next to the cable and put their mouth on it so you have to say “no”, they look at you and do it anyway. so, they know they are not supposed to do it but they will try their boundaries all the time. They try every day just to see if today is the day they will get away with it. So yeah, our bond and relationship with the pigs has massively increased because they live with us and they are part of the family now. they know who they can try it on with as well. My mother-in-law is a very slight woman and as they've got bigger, I mean he's a micro pig but he probably weighs about 18 stone and he's very dense, he knows that he can intimidate my mother-in-law. He knows that visitors come with food and we've always said “come with a carrot or something because that will make them want to interact with you”. So he knows as soon as she turns up he gets a carrot, so he waits and has his carrot, then he tries to bully her, not in a bad way, but he knows that she is a little bit wary of him and he will try back her into a corner. Not to actually do anything but, more as a dominance thing because he wants to feel like he is the big pig sort of thing. He's aware that she's a little bit wary of him and he tries to push that. It's definitely hard to explain without seeing it but they know how to act with certain people, like with my mum, she takes no shit whatsoever. If he's getting in the way of being a menace or whatever she will tell him to clear off. So the way he interacts with both of them is very different because he knows he can't give my mum any shit but he will give his mum some.

K: so he is quite in tune with people?

P: yeah he knows how people feel about him.

K: and do you think your life has changed since you've had them?

P: yeah definitely. Just in terms of like, because I work shifts all the time I do have to make sure that my routine fits into theirs. I have to get out of bed now to sort them out.

K: have they ever been unwell at all?

P: she had a bit of a day yeah, he's been fine touch wood. So one morning I went up to feed them and she just wouldn't come out the house. The first thing that happens in the morning when they see us is they get fed so they are usually straight out there when they see us. he came flying out but she didn't and she was kind of just sat in their little house. thankfully we were off that day so I came in and spoke to my other half and said “look I don't think she's right”. we were rattling pellets at her and she wasn't coming out, she eventually came out looking all lethargic and done in. If they’re off their food that's the one thing with pigs, if they're off their food there is normally something pretty wrong. so I rang the vets as soon as they opened, we brought her into the house and put her on the sofa just to keep an eye on her. for a few hours she was just lying there she had been sick, and it was really green, we still can't really work out what it was but she obviously eaten something that she probably shouldn't have the day before. her eyes were all glassy too, there were a lot of red flags screaming at me about her behavior so I rang up with the vets and they told me to bring her in. A little while later she seemed to get worse again, so I loaded her up into the car, because they've never really been separated, they get a bit funny when one was loaded into the car. So, I was trying to encourage the big pig outside so he wouldn't see us taking her away and then she sorts of came round. not enough so she was normal but enough so she would eat a little bit of pellets. I called the vet again to tell them what was going on, they were brilliant really. so, in the end we never had to take her and she had a sort of miraculous recovery in the afternoon and really embarrassed me. So, I had to tell the vet that although I thought she was dying two hours ago she's now absolutely fine. yeah, it was a bit scary, you don't want to see anyone in pain do you? Even if it's a stranger it's not nice to see people in pain, and especially when they can't tell you. so, you kind of have to work it out.

K: Do you have a plan for what happens when they die?

P: Do you mean emotionally or practically?

K: let's start with practically

P: our first priority would be, while they are insured so if anything happened we have that. I've seen on Facebook and stuff some farm vets are like Oh well it's not a dog and you wouldn't go that far to save a pig you know it's kind of it's time. So I am a bit worried about that but we do have money if something should go wrong. But I think our first instinct would be yeah save them. If the worst did happen then you just kind of have to deal with it don't you? Then then I would be worried about making sure that the pig that was left was OK. They've been together since the day they were born these two. If anything was to happen to one of them it would be quite a big shock to the system. We would have to work out if they would need a friend or if they'd be OK on their own. I will probably try and get a friend for them eventually because pigs are social, they do need another pig really so it would be those kind of considerations. We would just make sure that the pig we've still got is still OK, I wouldn’t want anything to happeen to both of them.

K: so you would maybe consider getting another pig

P: yeah my priority would be to make sure the remaining pig is OK.

K: do you think having a pig as a pet changes people's perception about them as animals

P: yes and no. We get a lot of jokes about eating the pigs as you can imagine. We get a lot of jokes about eating them, like “oh, just put them on the barbeque”. It's all in good faith, you know, we will have a laugh with people. Like if one of them is being a dickhead we will say “you're going on the barbeque later”. So, there is a lot of that and it's increased banter with people. So, it works both ways. Some people think open quote oh my god i can't believe you have a pig as a pet”... Like you have to explain that they're actually quite clean, they only poo in one bit and they won't go near it. You do explain this to people and some people you see them realize oh actually, what I did think I know about Pigs isn't quite true. People just think they roll around in shit all day and that's not true. They like being covered in mud but they're not interested in being covered in anything else if you know what I mean... The amount of people who want to come and see them as well, especially when they were piglets because they're cute aren't they? But even people at work, you know we probably have someone come round once a month purely to see them. Because they are sort of quite friendly and quite cuddly, they will roll over for a belly rub, they are quite funny, so I think it does change people's perceptions because you might only see loads of pigs in a field raised for bacon, so you don't necessarily hear that they are intelligent, as intelligent as a 3 year old. So yeah it does change people's perceptions because they've never really been around them. Certainly with my mates, like my partner grew up in the countryside so farms are normal for him, but I grew up on one of the largest council states in Europe, so I didn't have a lot of experience with farm animals as a kid. I didn't hold a chicken until I was like 26 or something. That's just not how I grew up. so, certainly my mates they've only ever seen pigs in a field or on their plate.

K: do you and your partner eat meat at all?

P: yeah we do. We both still eat pork. A lot of people don't, and I am quite conscious about where my meat comes from. So, a friend of mine is a farmer and I've known him for quite some time now. If I really wanted to I could go and see the meat that I eat, it's about 9 miles away from where I live and he butchers it all. I kind of like to think that I'm fairly ethical in the way that I eat my food. But no, it hasn't stopped me eating pork. I probably eat less pork than I used to.

K: do you think the pigs have made you more conscious of where your meat comes from or was that always in the back of your mind?

P: I probably had that ethical thing with the meat going on long before.

K: do your friends and family understand the relationship you have with your pigs?

P: so my dad's not really interested in animals he's not horrible to them or anything he's just not interested. Well he's just completely different now. they might come over on the weekend and whenever he comes around he goes straight to the garden and says hello to the pigs, not to me. he always brings a bag of veggies or something too. I fully expected him not to be bothered by them. But he seems quite taken with them and I don't really know why. I joke and say these might be the only grandkids you ever have.

K: Do you have a favourite activity to do with your pigs?

P: well their favorite thing is lying out in the sun so, and I like to do that too so we can do that together. so they aren't interested in anything if there's no food. when it comes to toys, they aren't really that interested. But they just love food, so we put peanut butter in bowls and stuff, we have treat bowls and things like that too. I like to freeze a load of fruit to when it's hot and then like hang them up so they have to try and get them down and work for it, so that's quite good fun I like that. We get the paddling pool out in the summer. And they wallow about in all the mud that is left when we tip it out. In terms of direct interactions a lot of it is like the training stuff. We don't really play directly with them because they're not that bothered

K: are there any challenges you faced with having a pet pig?

P: maybe their behavior when they're being stubborn little things. But we have been so lucky, the neighbors love them. Even everyone she has round has to come and see the pigs. So thankfully we have never had problems with our neighbors, I know some people do.

K: are there any other stories that you could tell me that give me insight into the relationship you have with your pigs?

P: a lot of them are encapsulated in videos. So maybe the most famous one amongst our friends and family, we hadn't had them that long and they were kind of venturing into the house and they were being trained with using the bell and things like that. I'm really into baking and I repurposed one of our cupboards to have all my baking stuff, like flour and everything like that. One day one of us had left the back door open while we were in the garden and hadn't seen one of the pigs go inside, we just walked into this absolute carnage. That was just flour everywhere. It was underneath all my cabinets and all over the sides. Absolutely everywhere. There's been quite a few moments like that, and it’s on us, you don’t expect them to do something. When we have thought oh they won't go into that, and then they do. It's not until they do something like that until you have to change absolutely everything. Now, everything we own is above pig nose height. You have to make sure that everything is above them when they can’t get it. So, we have a lot of stories like that! Just when you don’t think they are going to do something. We’ve had to take the opposite approach now, you assume that they are going to do everything and if they don’t, it’s a bonus.

K: Do you still have videos?

P: Yeah, all of them I can send them.

K: is there anything you wanted to add about the emotional connection with your pigs?

P: I think we covered most of it. I’d say, sort of to sum it up, I feel like you can have the same emotional connection with a pig than you can with a dog, you know, more of a domesticated pet if you know what I mean. I’ve grown up around dogs. My family have never had dogs but my Auntie, who is sort of like a second mum, has always had collies. So, I know what it is like to have a connection with dogs and other animals. I would say the way they behave is very different, like the loyalty you get with a dog isn’t necessarily there with a pig, so where a dog would do anything for you... I have no doubt that if I were to have a heart attack and die in their pen that I would be dinner in a couple days. I know dogs can do that too, but dogs are man's best friend, pigs are kinda man's acquaintance if you know what I mean. They are happy to chill with you and want to be your mate, but I don’t really think if I was getting attacked if either of them would stand up for me... they might, I don't know, but I just get that vibe that it’s a different relationship, but you can still have that emotional connection with them as you would with a more domesticated pet.

K:Is there sort of a species barrier between you then?

P: Yeah, in a way pigs and dogs inherently behave so differently. Like, I would say with the pigs, they very much know that they are prey if you know what I mean. They are very jumpy, they react to noises. If they lay on their beds that we have for them in the house and the door goes, if that door goes and you shoot up to get it, they both run out the back door to get away. Outside too, if they are facing away from you and you walk up behind them they can do the same thing because they’re very easily spooked. Like with a dog they will react, but it will be different because they will bark and try and face it. They also act completely different when they are together and when they are separate. She loves laying in the house all the day, the front room is really cool in the day so all she wants to do is lay in there. But if she is on her own she acts compeltely differently because she’s not worried about what he would think, because he is a bit more standoffish with us, so she gets so much more cuddly with us when he isn’t there, you can lay around her and cuddle her. If he’s around, she’s a bit more like “oh,I don’t want him to think I'm getting too in with the humans!” you know what I mean?

K: Sounds like a guilty pleasure!

P: I honestly think it is, she’s a sucker for a cuddle. She’s way more human-oriented than he is. He will do a drive-by, see if you have any food and then go on. He’s quite happy to clear off and do his own thing, but she will hang around for a cuddle and a rub. She’s very cute, they both are, but she is so cute and it’s hard not to give her a rub.