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Constructing animal species as social problems

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Abstract

Animal species are constructed as social problems in four ways: as pests that threaten people or their social arrangements; as endangered species whose survival is threatened; as invasive species that pose a threat to some new environment; and as deviants that misbehave. The rise of the animal rights movement has made the process of constructing species as social problems more contentious. Debates over these issues involve some combination of three sorts of actors: stakeholders claiming that a species poses a threat; counterclaimsmakers arguing that the species deserves protection; and animal management officials who must mediate these disputes. Identifying such patterns across case studies offers a basis for developing a more elaborate theory of social problems construction.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sociologists who study the construction of social problems tend to conduct case studies, but extending the constructionist perspective requires building upon the foundation that case studies offer by developing generalizations across cases (Best, 2015). This essay is a step in this direction. It reviews various case studies about the social construction of animal species as social problems and seeks to identify patterns in their findings. This might seem to be a somewhat narrow focus; there are obviously much larger literatures on, say, the construction of crimes or inequalities as social problems. But the literature on problematic species is both less familiar and of a more manageable size; reviewing these studies can help us recognize the sorts of parallels that can link constructionist case studies.

The constructionist perspective transformed the sociology of social problems by shifting its focus from equating social problems with social conditions, to recognizing that what social problems have in common is the process of social construction: Someone must claim that something is problematic (Best, 2017; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Most constructionist research consists of cases studies exploring the claimsmaking processes by which an issue becomes a focus of public concern.

Constructionist analysts recognize that claimsmaking occurs within a social context. That is, claimsmakers vary in wealth, power, and status, and these resources influence the effectiveness of their claims. Thus, claims about problematic animal species can come from a range of stakeholders, including claims about protecting one's personal property (e.g., a rancher trying to protect his cattle from infectious diseases); about protecting a community's stake in

nature (e.g., a wildlife official trying to protect an endangered species); or about the rights of some species (e.g., an activist opposing policies that might harm a species). Claimsmakers vary in their ability to successfully draw attention to an issue or influence social policies.

Systems for classifying and categorizing animals are obvious examples of the social construction of reality; they impose an analytic order on the natural world, by lumping and splitting fauna into particular types of beings (Zerubavel, 1996). In this paper, I will use the term *species* to refer to these types; in doing so, I include some categories (such as breeds of dogs) that are not formally recognized as distinct species by biologists (Herzog, 2006). My focus is those occasions when a species is defined as problematic, as some sort of social problem.

Because this paper is meant to contribute to the literature on social problems, and because humans conduct claimsmaking, this analysis focuses on people and how they interpret animals. I understand that post-humanist scholars in animal studies pose philosophical questions about the legitimacy of privileging humans' perspectives, but I am not seeking to contribute to that literature (Wolfe, 2010). Similarly, there are arguments that animals (and plants and inorganic material) should be recognized as actors, but no one claims that animals' actions are intended as—or meant to influence—social problems claims (Goedeke & Rikoon, 2008; Leap, 2014). My focus is on the processes by which people construct animal species as social problems. I begin by classifying problem species as pests, endangered, invaders, and deviants. I then identify the principal types of claimsmakers that participate in debates about problematic species, and key patterns in their interactions.

2 | PESTS

We can assume that the earliest humans would have recognized that some sorts of animals, such as wolves, mosquitoes, or leeches, posed threats of biting or even attacking people. And once people began practicing agriculture, they would have realized that their domesticated animals were threatened by predators, just as their crops were vulnerable to being overrun by locusts and other animal threats to their harvests. Still later, as medical knowledge spread, researchers began to identify species as vectors is the transmission of diseases, such as the discovery that malaria is transmitted by Anopheles mosquitoes. In all of these cases, species were constructed as threats to people's lives or well-being, as *pests*.

Not all dangerous animals belong to species of pests. Particular members of species that are considered generally innocuous may be defined as threats under the right circumstances, such as a runaway horse or a dog infected with rabies. And even among species that are widely viewed as pests, some particular animals, such as a pet rat, may be designated as harmless exceptions.

Most species are considered social problems only when and where they become pests (Jerolmack, 2008). Species in the wild—in their native habitat—are generally not deemed problematic until they interfere with people's activities. Thus, there are few claims about the dangers posed by large predators such as wolves and bears, so long as they remain in the wilderness. However, when people enter the predators' habitats and come into contact with them, or when the predators begin to infringe on human society—as when wolves kill cattle, or bears enter towns and raid garbage cans—there may be calls to do something to eradicate these pests (Harker & Bates, 2007; Scarce, 2005). Similarly, wild species that are not predatory may be constructed as pests if they impinge on people's interests, such as ranchers who worry that the protected bison in Yellowstone National Park spread disease to the cattle on adjacent ranches (McBeth, Shanahan, Hathaway, Tigert, & Sampson, 2010).

Experts argue that some constructions of threats from pests are misguided. For instance, Vetter (2018) argues that Californians' belief that their state is infested with poisonous brown recluse spiders is erroneous because that species does not occur naturally in California, and the spiders captured to prove that the threat is real invariably turn out to belong to other species. Similarly, Campion-Vincent (2005) describes how French concerns about a program to restore wolves in France invoke "big cat" legends about reported sightings of panthers and other large predators in many countries. However, the claimsmakers worried about pests may dismiss such debunking by experts and argue that the failure to find hard evidence of threats from these species simply confirms how wily these pests are. The

power to designate and address pests can rest in many different hands, ranging from those of corporations promoting products to ward off or kill pests, to officials charged with enforcing policies related to animals and the environment, to activists disputing claims that a species should be viewed as a pest.

3 | ENDANGERED

Contemporary understandings of animal species usually adopt an ecological framework; that is, species are understood to have a particular place or niche in a region's ecology. While ideas about a natural order have a long history, the ecological perspective emerged among scientists in the nineteenth century and only gained general public understanding in the second half of the twentieth century (Hannigan, 2006). In this view, there are natural ecological systems in which different species occupy complementary niches. Such systems can be disrupted when a species is endangered, or by invading species (invaders will be discussed in the next section).

While species can be endangered and become extinct in the course of natural selection, social problems claims about endangered species usually focus on cases where humans threaten a species. In some cases, the human threat is direct and obvious, as when people hunted the once-plentiful passenger pigeon into extinction (Greenburg, 2014). But the human threat can be less clearly immediate, as when people's settlements or fields unintentionally encroach on the habitat of a species. Even small changes may have serious consequences, as when a lighthouse keeper brought a single cat (in the role of an invasive species) to Stephen Island (off the coast of New Zealand) that managed to eradicate a unique bird species, the Stephen Island wren (Marra & Santella, 2016).

Human population growth and geographic expansion—particularly the establishment and expansion of European settlements in the New World—created threats to numerous species. As the frontier moved westward, North American species such as the passenger pigeon disappeared or, as with the dramatic shrinkage in the vast herds of bison, saw drastic reductions in their populations. This led to the creation of various official agencies aimed at managing animal species to try to preserve their numbers. Establishing hunting and fishing seasons, creating national parks and other wildlife sanctuaries, and other similar policies were intended to protect species that might otherwise become endangered. This protective apparatus has of course expanded widely in recent decades (Herda-Rapp & Goedeke, 2005). Since passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the U.S. federal government has formally designated endangered and threatened species and requires environmental impact statements for many projects that may include assessing effects that may endanger species. Public concern may be mobilized, particularly when an endangered species is deemed symbolically important, such as the news that the bald eagle was designated an endangered species from 1967 to 1995. (The bald eagle population, which had been in decline, has since rebounded to the point that the species is now considered a pest in some areas.) In other cases, it is more difficult to attract public support for endangered species. Some disputes about environmental impacts gain media attention, particularly when they involve threats to species that may strike critics as being obscure or unimportant, such as the contentious debate that slowed the construction of the Tellico Dam in Tennessee because the project might eradicate the snail darter (a small species of fish).

Assigning officials responsibility for managing species gives these claimsmakers more relative power. In general, officials have an easier time establishing and enforcing policies to protect the species they deem endangered. In contrast, broader claims by some environmental activists that whole classes of animals, such as frogs or bees, are threatened may attract media attention but have more difficulty influencing social policies.

4 | INVADERS

Increasing human migration and faster, more reliable methods of transportation not only brought people into contact with more species but also fostered the spread of species across great distances into new ecological systems. Some of this was deliberate: Europeans brought rabbits to Australia; possums to New Zealand (Potts, 2009); and sparrows to North America (Fine & Christoforides, 1991); in each case, there would be later claims that the species constituted

a social problem. In other cases, humans may have transplanted species inadvertently (e.g., the canoes that brought people from the Western Pacific to Easter Island seem to have also carried rats to an environment where they faced no predators, enabling a rat population explosion that in turn contributed to the island's deforestation; McAnany & Yoffee, 2010). As globalization increases, opportunities for both inadvertent and intentional transmission of invasive species only grow: Ships' ballast tanks and hulls can transport aquatic species, such as zebra mussels, vast distances, while the trade in exotic pets intentionally imports species to foreign environments, and pets that escape or are released can establish themselves in a new setting, such as Burmese pythons in Florida.

The key to becoming a successful invasive species is the absence of conditions, such as an inhospitable climate or predators, that might place natural limits on its population growth. This is turn creates new problems: The invading species now becomes a pest (eating crops, spreading disease, and perhaps preying on native species). This can lead to extraordinary efforts to manage the new threat, as when Australia built more than 2,000 miles of fencing in an effort to contain its rabbit population.

It is relatively easy to construct invasive species as social problems, as being out of place. Although species can be constructed as pests whenever they interfere with human's activities, counterclaimsmakers can argue that the species in question is part of the natural order, that the real problem is humans who are disrupting the natural balance. But invaders seem to be out of place by definition, so that their presence violates and perhaps threatens the natural order. Still, it is not impossible to construct defenses for an invasive species. For example, Seymour (2013) analyzes the rhetoric in behalf of monk parakeets in New York City (former pets who escaped or were released). Utility companies view the birds as pests because their nests tend to cause power outages, but parakeet defenders depict them as industrious immigrants being “persecuted by death squads” (p. 65). In sum, invasive species are not automatically seen as social problems.

5 | DEVIANTS

Still, other species acquire bad reputations: They are constructed as not just dangerous, but often anthropomorphized as having deviant characters, as being aggressive, diseased, sexually promiscuous, or lazy. For example, the pit bull is a popular dog breed, with a long history and millions owned in the United States, yet in recent years, after intensive media coverage about pit bulls involved in fatal attacks on children, the breed came under attack for its aggressive, even vicious character (Dickey, 2016; Harding, 2014). Similarly, the Australian coastal taipan (a snake) was characterized as a killer (Markwell & Cushing, 2016). Fine and Christoforides (1991) recount the campaign against the English sparrow (imported to the United States as a species that was comfortable living near human communities in order to help eradicate the insect pests that infested American cities). Sparrows came under attack as aliens of bad character who were lazy (in that they did not sing pleasing songs) and sexually promiscuous. Fine and Christoforides link the opposition to sparrows to the broader late-nineteenth-century campaign against the New Immigration. Similarly, Neo (2012) argues that opposition to pig farming in majority-Muslim Malaysia is “beastly racialization”: That is, the pig farmers are members of the Chinese minority, and claims against pig farms are an indirect claim in a larger ethnic conflict.

Anthromorphization need not be negative. It is not uncommon for advocates making counterclaims against constructions of a species as a pest or an invader to argue that the species displays admirable character traits: Mourning doves are gentle and peaceful (Herda-Rapp & Marotz, 2005), and otters are playful (Goedeke, 2005). But pests and invading species can be characterized as deviant, as innately problematic.

6 | THE RISE OF ANIMAL RIGHTS

The emergence of the modern animal rights movement (Munro, 2012) has reshaped discourse about problematic species. This change has affected sociology and other social sciences: The American Sociological Association

established an Animals and Society section; there is a *Society and Animals* journal; and so on. While there is no requirement that these analysts favor animal rights, the great majority of those working in the area of human–animal studies seem to ally themselves with the movement and its goals. In particular, the term speciesism has been adopted as a critique—analogous to racism or sexism—of beliefs that presume humans are superior beings entitled to promote their interests over those of animals (DeMello, 2012).

The emergence of more active, more vocal proponents of animal rights is important for claims about problematic species because they make debates about those species more complicated. In many cases, officials charged with managing animal species find themselves mediating between two competing factions: those who view species as pests or invaders and who want them constrained, and those who see themselves as defending the species and want policies that encourage or foster the animals' survival and expansion.

7 | SPECIES WARS

Claims about problematic species need not gain general acceptance. Some claims may be restricted to particular social worlds, as when farmers define a species as a pest that threatens their crops—a claim unlikely to attract attention beyond the agricultural sector. In other cases, officials may mount broad-based campaigns against some species thought to threaten agricultural production or public health, such as China's Great Leap Forward campaign against sparrows as one of the nation's "four pests" (Kreston, 2014). But the most sociologically interesting cases involve open debates, claims, and counterclaims disputing whether a species should or should not be considered a social problem.

Typically, such species wars occur among three categories of actors. First, there are animal management professionals, who often enter these debates when they promote the interests of species others deem problematic. Second, there are claimsmakers who seek to define some species as a social problem, as a pest, an invader, or a deviant. Finally, a third category of claimsmaker seeks to protect a species from being endangered. This third group has become more vocal with the recent rise of the animal rights movement. Species wars tend to involve particular sorts of conflicts: between officials and claimsmakers opposed to a species; between officials and claimsmakers seeking to protect a species; or when officials find themselves buffeted by conflicting claims that oppose and seek to protect some species.

A first broad category of debate pits animal management officials who seek to protect or promote some species against stakeholders who define that species as a pest or invader. This is a well-established tension for animal management officials: ranchers, farmers, or homeowners demanding more protection from pests, such as complaints that bison in Yellowstone National Park spread disease to cattle (McBeth et al., 2010), or that bears are entering residential communities in New Jersey and raiding garbage cans (Harker & Bates, 2007). In more recent decades, it is opposition to officials' efforts to reintroduce species that have been eradicated and are seen by stakeholders as pests, such as proposals to reintroduce wolves in France (Campion-Vincent, 2005) and Yellowstone National Park (Scarce, 2005). In other cases, officials find themselves struggling with people who enjoy recreational activities that endanger species. Thus, Florida has long struggled to get boaters to obey speed limits and other restrictions designed to protect manatees (Goedeke, 2004; Pittman, 2010).

A second type of debate also involves criticisms of officials' policies, but here, the opposition comes from advocates arguing that those policies endanger species. Often, animal management seeks to mediate in conflicts between animal species, in which one species is seen as threatening the survival of another; when other measures fail, harsher policies may be adopted, so that "native species are being killed in an attempt to save other native species" (Marra & Santella, 2016, p. 115). For example, officials have sought to reduce the number of sea lions that prey on salmon trying to swim upstream to spawn, or to kill Barred Owls that "have been displacing (and in many cases killing) the threatened Northern Spotted Owl" (Marra & Santella, 2016, p. 115). Such policies can lead to protests from animal advocates.

A well-established animal management policy is licensing hunting or trapping. Regulating hunting serves important purposes: Hunting culls the population of the hunted species, keeping its population from becoming too large which in turn may lead the starvation or ecological damage (too many deer can destroy vegetation); at the same time, when the population of a species seems in danger of falling below the desired level, officials can set tighter limits on the length of the hunting season or the amount of game that can be taken in order to give the species time to restore its numbers. These policies have become controversial as animal advocates increasingly oppose hunting and trapping as cruel (Goedeke & Rikoon, 2008; Harker & Bates, 2007; Herda-Rapp & Marotz, 2005; Munro, 1997).

Increasingly, a third category of debate has emerged in which three parties argue about animal management policies: (i) various sorts of stakeholders who either demand protection from pests and invaders, or who want to continue to enjoy various recreational activities such as hunting or fishing; (ii) animal advocates who either oppose officials' policies that threaten species, or who regard as cruel recreational activities that involve killing animals; and (iii) officials trying to mediate between these opposing sets of demands. These debates often involves claims and counterclaims about the character of the species under consideration.

For instance, Goedeke (2005; Goedeke & Rikoon, 2008) describes a conflict in Missouri over river otters. On the one hand, animal advocates offer an anthropomorphic celebration of the otters as playful creatures who should be cherished; on the other hand, fishing enthusiasts view the otters as pests that decimate fish populations because otters enjoy catching and killing more fish than they eat, so that otters should be removed from areas where people fish (it is important to realize that the fish in question are not simply part of nature but are raised in hatcheries and then released). Wildlife officials thus find themselves buffeted by competing claims to prioritize otters over fish, or fish over otters. Similarly, Herda-Rapp and Marotz (2005) examine a Wisconsin conflict over whether the state should authorize a hunting season for mourning doves: Animal advocates had managed to have the doves designated as the state's "symbol of peace" and their rhetoric emphasized its innocence; those in favor of a dove-hunt often classified the dove as a type of pigeon, a bird species often considered pests (Jerolmack, 2008); and officials had to mediate these competing characterizations and the related policy demands. Other case studies reveal similar dynamics with competing descriptions of the character of a species being presented to justify opposing policies in disputes: Black bears are constructed as "savage" predators vs. "docile and caring" (Harker & Bates, 2007, p. 343); cattle egrets as diseased and "aesthetically unattractive" vs. "innocent and aesthetically beautiful" (Čapek, 2005: 201); manatees as "grotesque and ugly" vs. "harmless and endangered" (Goedeke, 2004: 107); possums as "cunning" invaders vs. "cute" (Potts, 2009: 4, 13); and prairie dogs as "destructive rodents" vs. a keystone species "whose very presence contributes to a diversity of life and whose extinction would consequently lead to the extinction of other forms of life" (Zollinger & Daniels, 2005: p. 261, 266). In such cases, animal management officials are forced to weigh the options and devise a policy that is nearly certain to be viewed as wrongheaded by at least some of the parties to the dispute.

A fourth category of debates involves competing claims by advocates for different species. The culture of animal rights necessarily must confront the fact that interspecies relations are often competitive, even predatory: Barred owls push spotted owls out of their territory; sea lions eat salmon; while otters enjoy chasing and killing fish. It is relatively easy for animal activists to catalog and criticize the harms that humans do to animals, to denounce speciesism. But weighing the rights of competing animal species poses challenges. This becomes particularly evident in the debates between advocates for cats and advocates for birds (Marra & Santella, 2016). There is a growing body of evidence that cats kill large numbers of birds, and at least reason to suspect that the number of birds being killed by cats is growing. In part, this reflects the decline of larger predators that may once have helped keep the population of cats (particularly feral cats) in check, as well as efforts by well-meaning people to feed feral cats. Bird advocates argue that efforts should be made to trap and euthanize feral cats and to discourage cat owners from allowing their pets to roam outside. Cat advocates counter that charges that cats threaten bird populations are exaggerated and euthanizing cats is inhumane. Birds and cats both are familiar to virtually everyone, and both are popular with many millions of people, which insures that this is a contentious debate.

Finally, it is worth noting campaigns by advocates trying to rehabilitate the reputations of species that have been characterized as deviants. This is a common element in many debates, in which advocates trying to defend a species

offer favorable anthropomorphic interpretations of its character. However, this rhetorical work becomes particularly important when critics have attacked a species as deviant. Thus, media coverage has singled out pit bulls as a particularly vicious, aggressive dog breed (Dickey, 2016; Harding, 2014). In response, the breed's defenders emphasize its favorable character traits, and its long history as a popular family pet.

8 | FINDING PATTERNS IN CASE STUDIES OF SPECIES BEING CONSTRUCTED AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There are already dozens of case studies of the social construction of animal species as social problems. This review has identified two patterns in the findings of these studies. First, there is a set of rationales for identifying a species as a social problem: The species is a pest that threatens people or their social arrangements; the species is endangered and in need of protection; the species has invaded places beyond its natural habitat; or the species is constructed as having a deviant character. Second, social problems claimsmaking—and sometimes counterclaimsmaking—about species tend to involve interactions among particular sorts of parties: animal management officials who are generally charged with minimizing the harms caused by pests, controlling invaders, and protecting endangered species; stakeholders demanding protection from pests and invaders; and animal advocates calling for better protection of species that they deem to be endangered. Controversies over problematic species tend to involve interactions between different combinations of these actors, and there are parallels in the sorts of rhetoric these actors use in the various types of disputes.

Because analyses of social problems tend to be case studies, there is a powerful temptation to focus on the particulars of a given case, the specific claims made when constructing some species as a social problem. Only by comparing constructions across different case studies can we recognize the patterns, the parallels among social problems discourse that extend across several cases. In other words, choices of rhetoric or tactics can be recognized as rooted in the general situation, rather than the particulars of the case at hand.

In theory, we might imagine that all social problems claims could be constructed independently but, in practice, the rhetoric used in the claims and counterclaims about one problem often parallel their counterparts for other problems. To be convincing, claims must be consistent with the cultural beliefs and assumptions of those the claimsmakers hope to persuade. In the case of claims about animal species, relevant cultural elements include ideas about the natural order, about humans' and animals' places in that order, and about animal rights. As a consequence, characterizations of types of problematic species (as pests, endangered, invaders, or deviants) and the sorts of arguments offered by animal management officials, claimsmakers, and counterclaimsmakers in debates regarding those species tend to involve similar elements.

Inductive theory-building requires not just assembling findings from case studies but comparing those findings to identify patterns and build generalizations, which can in turn be tested (Charmaz, 2013). As the constructionist literature on social problems has grown, there are now many opportunities to move beyond case studies, to identify patterns such as those outlined in this review of studies of the construction of problematic animal species, with the goal of developing a more elaborate social problems theory.

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