3 Hoarders

*Shoring Up Self*

Cat “Hoarders” Are Usually Victims of Mysterious Obsession. Nearly 90 cats had taken over Terry’s home in the Bronx. . . . The thought of giving up any of her cats . . . hurt. “I got so close to the baby cats that I couldn’t give any of them away . . . I figured no one else could take care of them like I could.” . . . When officers last week entered a Petaluma home filled with about 200 cats, they found floorboards soaked and warped by urine and feral animals burrowed inside walls. Some of the cats were malnourished or sick. A few had already died. Barletta told *The Chronicle* last week that she was trying to find homes for her cats. . . . Their numbers simply spiraled out of control. “I know this sounds bizarre,” she said. “But I’m a rational person.”

—San Francisco Chronicle, May 27, 2001

When adolescents explain their prior cruelty, many are distressed by memories they cannot readily excuse. Although they recall their unsavory behavior as a way to “try on” adult identities, this account does not entirely numb whatever guilt or uneasiness they still feel. Others are indifferent, viewing their memories as unimportant matters that neither help nor hurt their self-image, but they too compartmentalize their former abuse by linking it to a transition out of childhood. They have moved on; memories of abuse are just that. Their sense of self is not based on relationships with animals—whether positive or negative.

Mistreating animals, however, can play a more vital role for the self when people base their entire identity on such harm. It is not a memory of a random event, a lapse in judgment, or “going crazy” but the essence of who they are as people. They use cruelty—or how they redefine it—to build their sense of self, define their purpose in life, and most important, console themselves that what others see as loathsome if not criminal, mentally ill, or pathetic is no such thing. They tell themselves and others that they are decent and kind.

Severe neglect plays a vital role for the self of animal hoarders. Their identities hinge on amassing dozens or even hundreds of cats, dogs, and
other assorted creatures, purportedly out of concern and love for them (Lockwood 1994), only to withhold the rudiments of humane care and the necessities of life. Law enforcement agents, animal control officers, housing officials, shelter workers, and veterinarians often find these animals in pitiful condition, chronically underfed or even starved, living in inadequate, overcrowded housing, and sometimes harboring painful diseases, behavioral problems, or physical impairments (Campbell and Robinson 2001). They also find hoarders and those living with them to be socially isolated and to suffer ill health. Sanitary conditions frequently deteriorate to the point where dwellings become unfit for human habitation.

On their surface, incidents of hoarding make for good news stories because they are so extraordinary, baffling, and sad—scores of sick and starved animals being kept in filthy, cluttered homes often by people who claim to “love” them. “Experts” who must deal with them all weigh in on what they think causes people to grossly neglect their animals, homes, families, and selves. The result is that hoarders’ identities become a matter for public speculation. Various experts alternatively portray them as mentally ill, criminal, or simply pitiful.

Speculation about the nature of hoarding can easily shame hoarders when it is both public and negative. One hoarder claims that such thinking implicitly asks her: “How can you do it? How can you live like this? How can you live with animals, it’s filthy, it’s dirty, if nothing else, don’t you care about other people? Don’t you this? Don’t you that? I never hear the end of it.” In response, hoarders justify or excuse their behavior, in the press and in person. Hoarders’ justifications and excuses seem as outlandish as their behavior toward animals and property, starkly contrasting the grim “reality” of these situations. Yet, that they have them is unsurprising. Others who feel maligned resort to similar “accounts” or “neutralizing techniques” to normalize the behavior in question (Hewitt 2000). Hoarders, too, craft personal narratives that reveal how they wish to be regarded by journalists or sociologists who interview them as well as neighbors, friends, family, and strangers. When hoarders are accused of wrongdoing, these accounts lubricate awkward social interaction and protect the hoarder’s threatened identity.

That hoarders explain and defend their behavior is not unusual; it is how they do so that merits attention. Their identity work does more
than neutralize and deflect unwelcome or derogatory views, it paints a flattering self-portrait that is firmly anchored in widely accepted and rewarded roles borrowed liberally from our general culture. Unlike the adolescents described in the preceding chapter who were either remorseful or indifferent about their cruelty, hoarders are passionate and proud about the many animals they acquire and claim to “care” for in self-proclaimed roles such as parent or shelter worker. Hoarders emphasize that, even if sacrifices are necessary, they can be counted on in tough situations to constantly keep in mind and help needy creatures. In other words, to console themselves, they present an image of themselves as saints.

**Identity as a Public Issue**

Private troubles are converted into public issues by the media, which selectively gathers up the building blocks of individual experiences, invests them with broader meaning by drawing on the opinions of experts, and makes them available for public consumption. Individual cases become symptomatic of a larger problem, as specialists or authorities offer their explanations of the problem’s causes. And when crimes, homelessness, or unemployment are reported in the news, certain types of social control agents—police, social workers, housing authorities, physicians and others—become identified with the proper management of people thought to pose serious social problems (Best 1995; Mills 1959; Sacco 1995). Each agency questions the personal identities proffered by those being managed and provides them with alter identities compatible with the agency’s own perspective. Depending on the institution, people can be defined as “bad,” “mad,” or “sad” (Schneider and Conrad 1992), when the criminal justice, the medical care, and public health systems manage them.

In the news, hoarders are not associated with any of these institutions, since no one agency claims to best manage them. Readers are left with a bricolage of reports about these people from various experts that are interpreted and summarized in the news. As they try to limit or stop the harm of animals, people, and property, these reports show that organizations have conflicting conceptions about hoarders’ identities and the meaning of their neglect. They are painted as criminal, mentally ill, or pathetic.
In this mix of opinions, journalists who write about hoarders become significant players because they cull and report the views of various authorities. How we come to regard hoarders and assess their relationships with animals depends on the willingness and ability of journalists to capture not only the perspectives of organizations dealing with hoarding but the perspectives of hoarders themselves. Although the news is a platform of communication, hoarder’s voice is permitted expression only within narrowly confined limits. The constraint to present ‘balanced’ stories with many sides and viewpoints, and to defer to the opinions of ‘experts,’ leaves scant room for this voice.

The Person

The hoarder-as-criminal identity stems from the press’s crime-story convention. These stories typically begin with complaints about hoarders from neighbors who report “strong,” “obnoxious” odors or “stench,” and occasionally nuisance problems such as “barking loudly.” Neglect is seldom the initial complaint because animals are usually concealed inside hoarders’ homes. Hoarders are usually described as “uncomfortable around people” or as “quiet and somewhat reclusive,” boarding up windows, rarely appearing outside, and not answering doorbells. This isolation makes it difficult if not impossible for neighbors to know much about them or their animals. Law enforcement authorities are eventually called to the scene, typically discovering many suffering or dead animals that are taken away from angry or grieved owners who potentially face charges of cruelty and possible conviction and sentencing.

Presenting hoarding as a crime story means that articles often emphasize, in dramatic terms, the perspective of those who intervene to help animals harmed or put in danger by hoarders. Use of terms such as “rescued,” “seized,” or “raid,” rather than the more neutral “confiscated” or “claimed,” underscore the law enforcement approach to managing hoarders and the aggressive steps needed on behalf of animal victims who apparently need to be “taken away” with some urgency. This perspective also paints each case as the “worst” or “most horrifying” incident, describing animal neglect in superlative terms. One article cites a humane official who said, “‘You can’t imagine people accumulating that sort of filth and garbage.’ . . . Frazier said that it was the most foul scene he had encountered in his six years on the
job.’” Another official maintained that a different case involved the “largest number of neglected animals ever seen.”

Since the law enforcement viewpoint dominates these articles, hoarders do not routinely comment on these actions and when they do, they, predictably, protest unlawful and unnecessary seizure of their “children.” Some hoarders are characterized as resistant to authority. One is described as “so belligerent the police were called to help,” at which point the hoarder wrestled with police, who sprayed him with pepper spray and finally arrested him. Others have histories of being uncooperative or hostile. It is common for articles to describe repeated attempts, sometimes spanning years, to take animals away from hoarders who resist these efforts by authorities. In one case, an article features the headline, “Notorious Cat Hoarder Jailed” and details the exploits of a “wily and elusive foe.” Another article notes that “as is true of most animal hoarders, Becker had a track record,” listing her history of being deceptive and difficult with authorities as she chronically acquired animals.

Although the crime-story format sensitizes readers to view hoarders as criminals—they violate the law and get “busted” by agents who seize their “property” (i.e., animals) and possibly take them to court—articles show them being handled leniently. Reports of cruelty charges actually being filed are uncommon. When charges are filed, they tend to be for other problems like child endangerment or assault and battery of an investigating police officer. Guilty verdicts or no contest pleas are rare. Most often, if any sentence is passed, hoarders are ordered to give up animals, not get any more either temporarily or permanently, or stop breeding them. Occasionally, they are modestly fined or made to reimburse shelters for the cost of food and veterinary care. Jail time is almost never imposed, despite frequent mention of maximum sentences, such as “Helen Miller [a hoarder] could face up to 17 years in prison.” In rare reports of hoarders receiving jail time, the sentence was usually for crimes having nothing to do with animals. For example, one hoarder, charged with “extreme” neglect of twenty-eight animals, was immediately jailed because of child neglect and charges of “felony child endangerment.” In other cases, hoarders were sentenced to jail for contempt of court, fraud, and violation of probation.

There are many ways to explain this apparent leniency, although hoarders think it is stern to impose any limit on their animal ownership.
Certainly, hoarding—despite the numbers of animals involved and the extent of their suffering—will be overshadowed in court by the many serous crimes against humans that officials see, and hoarding is classified under the law as neglect rather than abuse, calling forth more sympathetic than punitive responses. However, a second image of hoarders in the news—that of the eccentric perhaps even mentally-ill animal owner—is most likely why their criminalization seems inappropriate.

Psychological interpretations are common in reports about hoarding. They rely on a medical model that views this behavior as an individualistic, idiosyncratic symptom of a disordered personality. Hoarding is assumed to be a psychopathologic problem and hoarders are assumed to be “sick,” irrational, or at least seriously “misguided.” Conjectured causes for hoarding fall short of overtly psychotic behavior (Worth and Beck 1981) but include addiction, attachment disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and zoophilia (HARC 2000).

Many articles provide a quick diagnosis of animal hoarder “syndrome” by citing any authority figure present with an opinion about their motivation or behavior, including housing inspectors, firefighters, police, animal control officers, and humane officials, as well as unnamed “researchers” or “authorities.” Typically, these comments lack much psychological depth, sophistication, or consistency. “Symptoms” of this “disorder” vary from article to article and are often vague and clinically questionable, such as the suggestion that a hoarder has “too much love” for animals. One article, for example, is heavily sprinkled with a journalist’s and a humane official’s talk about “obsession” and “addiction,” at one point comparing hoarders to “tobacco addicts or shopping addicts.” The effect of such popular psychologizing is to create a folk diagnosis of hoarding, in the absence of any official category for animal hoarding as a mental health problem or clinical diagnosis by trained mental health professionals.

Despite occasional references to being “crazy,” “far out of reality,” or “not all there,” these folk diagnoses do not claim that hoarders suffer from serious mental disorders. It is far more common for articles to paint a picture of them as eccentric or “wacky,” arguing that the difference between “sensible” pet owners and hoarders is that the latter “don’t stop at a few dogs or even a dozen.” One article, for example, portrays a hoarder of dogs, birds, foxes, guinea pigs, iguanas, and a baboon as bizarre but well meaning, calling her “a nice woman who
needs a little help.” The major thrust of another article is that the hoarder is an eccentric, cantankerous fake—a real “character.” The article suggests that she falsified her college attendance, used a phony English accent, lied about her age, used many aliases in court, wore fake animal clothing, and earned a living as a psychic. Moreover, the article lightheartedly questions the seriousness of her neglect, asking, “Her alleged crime?” and answering, “Owning Bugsy, Vampira and their kittens.” In the same lighthearted spirit, the article notes that this hoarder had been “playing cat and mouse with animal control officers for 13 years.” Similarly, a reporter asked a humane official, “What drives people to take in more animals than they can handle and how [can] people spot hoarders in their neighborhoods?” to which the official replied, they have an “illness” but “they’re average, normal people.”

Press reports of judges’ actions further the image that hoarders are not seriously disturbed. Judges rarely suggest or require counseling. Indeed, even when they allude to possible mental health problems in hoarders, they may not order or recommend therapy. In one such case, the judge simply commented, “I think it’s clear you are fixated on animals. In your obsession, you really are misguided.” This reticence to recommend psychological help is surprising for three reasons. First, a number of hoarders’ behaviors seemed symptomatic of serious psychological disorder based on how badly they neglected their animals, homes, and themselves. Second, sometimes hoarders’ own attorneys cited their clients’ histories with mental illness, suggesting chronic and serious problems. And third, sometimes investigators specifically asked judges to approach hoarders as irrational or disturbed individuals.

Instead of serious mental disorder, hoarders are more often thought to have a “blind spot” that prevents them from seeing the ill effects of their basically good intentions. Many articles characterize the impulse to “save” animals as a matter of having “too much love” or “compassion.” Hoarders were animal “lovers” and headlines such as “Compasion Unleashed” or “Animal Passions” emphasize this point. The text of many articles elaborate this theme. One, for example, notes, “This woman loved animals so much she could not turn them away.” Another cites the hoarder’s lawyer, who claimed, “This is not an animal abuse case. It’s an animal loving case that went too far.” Other articles claim that hoarders love their animals too much to give them up, even though they cannot care for them.
Sometimes hoarders’ presumed strong love for animals is not specifically stated but implied as though a mysterious force drove them to amass animals. One hoarder explained that he had eighty-eight dogs because “it was impossible to give them away.” In another case involving sixty-eight dogs and cats discovered in squalid conditions, the officers conducting the investigation said that the hoarder appeared to be unable to turn away a stray because of her feelings for animals. And in a case involving two hundred cats, a humane society representative said that the hoarder “can’t seem to get rid of” the animals.

A few hoarders showed some awareness of the problem, acknowledging that their love for animals had “gotten a little out of hand.” One hoarder, charged with animal neglect for failing to sufficiently feed and water forty-eight horses, ponies, and donkeys, and thirty-two dogs, wept in court, explaining that “her intentions were to save animals, but she had acquired more animals than she could handle.” “Between sobs,” the article reports, the hoarder “said she was sorry she had not cared for the animals properly. ‘I would go hungry myself before my animals would go without.’” Similarly, a hoarder in another case said: “I have loved animals all my life and would never set out to make them suffer. But because of my stupidity and arrogance in thinking I could cope, I made these gentle creatures suffer. It is something I will never forgive myself for.” And yet another hoarder admitted, “I just got a little overwhelmed. I’m just a good person whose heart was bigger than my abilities.”

Given that they had so much “love” for their animals, hoarders retreated from human contact because of the enormous responsibility of caring for their charges. This retreat furthered an image of eccentricity more than mental illness. Hoarders’ animals were their “only family and friends,” “babies,” or “children.” The title of one article reads, “Dog Owner Is Told to Curtail His Collie Clan” and elsewhere refers to the hoarder’s “pack.” Another article points out that because the hoarder has so many animals, she does not take trips or use television or radio. A number of articles, somewhat pathetically, note that hoarders feel as though their entire purpose in life was taken away from them if their animals were seized and destroyed. “What else do I have anymore?” one hoarder said.

This blind spot casts hoarding as a minor psychological problem rather than as a serious pathology. Saying that hoarders suffer from
“too much love” assumes strong positive feelings toward animals that might include nurturing and other socially sanctioned behaviors. That these feelings for animals simply went astray problematizes this behavior as an inability to control impulses that are almost admirable, and certainly not criminal. As one hoarder said, “These people act as if you have a psychological problem if you want to help animals. I did nothing illegal, yet they treat me like a common criminal.” In the end, hoarders are classified by the press as a highly eccentric subset of “animal lovers” whose quirkiness falls short of full-blown mental illness.

For the most part, then, the news does not report hoarding to be a serious mental disorder. Judges almost never order psychiatric counseling for hoarders and theories of causation supplied by various authorities and experts equate their actions with everyday impulse-control problems like smoking or gambling. Indeed, these theories often provide sympathetic portrayals of hoarders as people who simply “loved animals too much,” images supported by hoarders and their friends and lawyers who, when permitted, defend their actions as well meaning although excessive.

If not portrayed as seriously ill, hoarders are characterized as pathetic and sad people who live in nightmarish “squalor” that is hard for most people to comprehend. As the news describes the drama of the “worst” cases, it often concentrates on hoarders’ life-styles and living conditions in ways that might elicit pity or even disgust in readers. Such a strong reaction is likely because hoarders are reported to violate taboos against excessive filth and disorder. As such, their public identity becomes more animal than human.

Articles about hoarders often paint a picture of domestic squalor. Typical headlines read, “Man Cited in Keeping 60 Labradors in Filth,” “Cats Seized from Squalid Home,” and “Menasha Woman Gets Jail Term for Keeping Pets in Filthy Home.” The article headlined “Dog Lover Gets More Time to Clean” describes the case of a woman with 140 dogs (not reported as neglected) whose house was declared a “public nuisance” by health department officials because its floors needed scraping and scrubbing to get rid of the feces and roaches. Some of the articles noted that, in addition to being extremely unkempt and unsanitary, the hoarders’ homes were abandoned, falling apart, or burned because of their owner’s neglect. In one case, the hoarder had a candle on her television set that dripped on an adjacent plant that in turn
ignited the television, causing it to explode, blow out the front window, and start a more general house fire.

Descriptions of stench-filled, dilapidated, run-down homes create an image of hoarders as pathetic, troubled people whose life-styles clearly separate them from prevailing community standards. Detailed descriptions are common of feces, urine, and spoiled food found throughout hoarders’ homes, defying conventional cultural norms that restrict domestic animals’ movement, excretion, and eating to limited and specified areas. Not merely unaesthetic and chaotic, hoarders’ homes were uncivilized. Homes and yards also were littered with animal carcasses, further contributing to the image of uncivilized chaos. A few reports describe scenes of carnage and death, with animal corpses scattered throughout the hoarders’ homes in varying degrees of decomposition, sometimes partially eaten by other animals. One article describes a house “covered with feces, several inches thick in places” with “dead, dying, and half eaten cats” throughout. When humane workers arrived at one home with over two hundred dogs, they found “dead dogs hanging from windows. There were pieces of bodies of dogs. Some dogs were dead in their cages. . . . Some adult dogs were feeding on puppies.” Several articles report that animal cadavers were discovered in refrigerators. One, for example, reports that investigators discovered twenty-nine dead cats and a decomposed six-inch alligator in the hoarder’s freezer. One bag of frozen cats was marked “S. Sauce.” There was some question about whether five bags and a large pot of spaghetti sauce also in the freezer might have been made from cat meat.

The result of the urine, feces, decomposed food, and cadavers was utter chaos and “overpowering stench,” as though hoarders and their animals had sunk to a level of existence that was far below civilized standards. Articles suggest that this squalor was so bad that neither humans nor animals should live in such uncivilized conditions. Rather than simply describing this squalor, media accounts usually quote humane officials, house inspectors, or firefighters who recount in graphic terms the extreme clutter and stench they encountered, how it affected them, and the steps they took to overcome it.

Officials typically report that hoarders’ homes and lives are “out of control,” noting that animals “overrun” homes or have “total run” of them. Two headlines make this point: “Home Found Overrun with Birds [215 birds “in cages stacked from floor to ceiling in every room”]:
Resident . . . Found Dead” and “More Than 100 Dogs Take Over Home.” The text of the accompanying articles elaborates this out-of-control image. In one case, the hoarder lived in the attic because she had turned over the rest of her house to animals. Another article says, “It was like a jungle in there. They had plenty of food, but the cats were living almost one on top of the other on one floor of the house. It was appalling.” In another case, an animal official claims that the house is literally “running with cats. . . . [They] were observed perched on top of appliances, living inside furniture and cabinets and ranging through the several rooms.” In yet another case, cats were found living in the crevices of the walls. The animals appeared to be in control, free to do whatever they wished. Once the animals are in control, hoarders’ homes lose their human nature in press reports, where they are instead described as “zoos,” “menageries,” or in one case a “feces clogged urban Noah’s Ark” full of “strange creatures” including small birds, a wolf, foxes, hedgehogs, snakes, raccoons, guinea pigs, iguanas, fourteen dogs, and a baboon. Investigators also thought they saw an orangutan.

With animals “in control,” hoarders’ everyday habits appear less human. Their eating patterns, for example, could resemble those of animals. One article notes, “She eats dog food and grain along with her animals.” Another article reports that the hoarder’s son “has to eat in the loftier of the bunk beds to keep Spot, vaguely Dalmatian and the unquestioned leader of the pack, from picking his plate clean.” Sleeping, too, became animal-like for some hoarders. Other articles describe this behavior in a hoarder who “sometimes slept” with her two hundred rabbits in “two cramped and filthy sheds,” a hoarder who lived in a six-foot square rabbit hutch with her dozen cats and dogs, and a hoarder who said that she “used to sleep on the bottom bunk, . . . but I kept waking up with too many dogs on my chest. They were cutting off my air supply.”

Once hoarders lost control of their animals, their squalor and subhuman status suggested their acts were more pitiful than criminal, more sad than seriously mentally ill. Indeed, it was common for the press to quote people who felt “sorry” for hoarders. For example, in one case of dozens of sick cats living in squalor, a “code compliance officer” said “he felt sorry for the 57-year-old owner of the home. . . . He said the man was probably just trying to care for stray cats and they multiplied to the point that they were no longer manageable.”
Overall, then, the press presents a confused picture of hoarders, who are variously portrayed as criminal, mentally ill, or loathsome. But this inconsistency is not the press’s fault. It reflects society’s confusion about how to view these people. Much of what people read in the news is a distillation of how social problems are made sense of by organizations that enforce laws, rescue survivors, and otherwise intervene in these situations (Fishman 1995). Because hoarding is a relatively new and complex social problem, organizations that deal with hoarders are themselves unsure how to think about or best manage them. Although experts are reluctant to deal with hoarders, they still get involved and express opinions about what kind of person commits such chronic and severe animal neglect. In turn, journalists do their best to present these ideas, however conflicted and tentative they are, to readers of the news. The one consistency is that all the characterizations are negative, from the hoarders’ perspective.

The Problem

The press has a bigger hand in shaping a different aspect of these cases. In addition to classifying the kind of person hoarders are, news coverage influences how the problem is portrayed and who should be blamed for it. Many articles appear to de-emphasize the severity of animal neglect, while some deflect blame away from hoarders.

Several articles mention animal neglect but give little detail. While there were reports of animals suffering from respiratory diseases, eye infections, heartworm, diarrhea, conjunctivitis, flu, ear mites, fleas, and malnutrition, only a few articles elaborate or emphasize these conditions. Instead, emphasis is placed on the disgusting or horrifying state of hoarders’ homes and life-styles, overshadowing reports of animal suffering. There were even more superlatives used to describe squalor and uncivilized behavior than there were to describe animal suffering. And photographs of neglect were uncommon. Rare exceptions show a young horse with debris on its forelock and mane, a badly matted cocker spaniel, and a horse whose hooves were untrimmed and beginning to curl upward.

Other articles are mixed or ambiguous in their reports of animal neglect. Some note neglect in certain animals but not in others. According to the animal control officer involved in one case, nine cats were in “tough shape.” “You could tell those animals were pretty sick,” he said,
“just by looking at them” because they had “severe ringworm” and “various respiratory ailments.” Yet, 6 dogs and over 20 cats left in the home had “no serious ailments.” In another case, a humane official said that the hoarder’s dogs were “mistreated and badly cared for,” but only 20 out of 249 seized dogs were “put down . . . because they were in extremely poor health.” In other articles it is unclear how many animals were involved, how many were neglected, or what their condition was when the case broke. For instance, one reported “dead from neglect and starvation,” which in its brevity could make it hard for some readers to imagine the nature and extent of suffering experienced by these animals. Another article merely says that the animals “were not cared for properly and were living in dirty cages.”

And some articles make no mention of animals’ poor health or suffering, describing them as healthy and active, or at least not suffering serious health problems. One such piece notes that the hoarder’s ten horses and nearly one hundred ducks, turkeys, and chickens “aren’t in good condition. . . . [But] most are suffering from the types of ailments you would expect from animals living without proper nutrition or medical care. None of these ailments are life-threatening.” Photographs of hoarders’ animals in their homes often feature animals that appear healthy and active and, less commonly, in “normal” interaction with hoarders. One article, for example, uses four photographs, all of healthy or active animals and a sign outside the hoarder’s “sanctuary” reading, “Beyond These Gates Lies a Safe Haven for All of God’s Creatures.”

When victims get center stage in these reports, they are more likely to be human than animal. For example, child neglect by hoarders trumped animal neglect in both headlines and text. In one such article, the headline reads, “8 Children Taken from Squalid Home” and text describes a couple charged with child endangerment for letting their eight children live amid animal carcasses, excrement, and spoiled food. Toward the end of the short article, there is brief mention that the local humane society “was expected to cite the couple” because a horse and cow were found dead from neglect and starvation on their property. To some extent, these articles position animal hoarding as the cause of child endangerment or “environmental child neglect” rather than a problem in its own right. For example, one article entitled “Girl’s Escape from Filthy House in Detroit Leads to Kids’ Rescue: Animals and Garbage
Filled Home” details the chaotic and unsanitary mess in this home, including “clouds of fleas,” animals standing in feces and urine, caged animals, broken toys, human feces, and “crumpled religious pamphlets and posters.” Most of the article chronicled the “pitiful” plight of the children, who were severely neglected by their parents. A single sentence notes the condition of the animals—an undetermined number of cats, hamsters, and a guinea pig were “so diseased that they were put to sleep.”

That neglected animals and their harm receive short shrift is consistent with studies showing that the news in general focuses much more on criminals than on victims (Graber 1980; Sherizen 1978). Here, the “disaster” of squalor is given much more attention and detail than animal neglect, which appears to be a less important issue or even an afterthought. Because these articles focus on the hoarder’s living conditions, readers may be less horrified about animal neglect than they are about squalor. To the extent that the press can rouse public interest for new issues and problems, articles de-emphasizing animal neglect may not elicit enough horror in readers to lead them to regard hoarding as a serious problem or prompt them to take action to prevent or better manage it. There also is the possibility that the de-emphasis of animal neglect might lead some readers to question the legitimacy of shelter workers who seize and euthanize these animals.

Indeed, to some readers, the real “criminals” in these cases are humane law enforcement agents and shelter workers who are seen as insensitive and cruel to victimize hoarders by seizing their animals. Rather than eliciting public indignation toward hoarders for putting animals in this position, readers can be inflamed by the actions of agents and workers who can appear in newspaper reports to be in a rush to dispose of these animals. At least a third of the articles report that humane workers killed hoarders’ animals because they were considered unadoptable in their current condition. Animals were “euthanized,” “destroyed,” or “put to sleep.” At other times, this outcome is suggested as a possibility. For example, a few articles report that “making room” in shelters for hoarders’ animals meant that humane workers “might” have to euthanize healthy shelter animals. Other articles are blunter and could easily make humane officials appear to bear total responsibility for killing these animals, even though hoarders created the problem in the first place. One headline, for example, notes “55 Cats
Given Death Penalty: Owner to Pay Up to $5000 to Try to Save 10 Other Felines.

Other elements of news reporting make it easy to blame these workers and think of them as cruel. While some articles describe the ill health of animals that apparently justified their killing, not all provide such detail and some only briefly mention animals’ veterinary condition. To the uninformed reader, it may not be clear why these conditions warrant killing animals rather than having veterinary personnel treat them. For example, in one case, an animal control officer confiscated 143 dogs, “many of which were in such bad shape they had to be put to sleep right away . . . [and] many of the dogs had severe mange.” It was unclear, however, exactly how many dogs were killed, whether mange was their only problem, and why mange was such a difficult problem to treat. In another case, a hoarder’s 205 dogs were seized, 25 of whom were “in such bad condition that they were euthanized”; the only ill health noted, however, was that the dogs’ problems ranged from “lack of food and shelter to oozing sores,” conditions that would appear to be treatable. Nor is there discussion about the behavioral problems of these animals that would make their adoption unlikely, and that might make the public more sympathetic to the plight of officers and shelter workers who must deal with these animals.

And finally, articles never report humane staff members’ feelings or reservations about euthanizing these animals. Without such reports, these workers might appear to be heartless or uncaring, despite the fact that they experience considerable distress over euthanasia (Arluke 1994b). In one news story, a humane official acknowledged and bemoaned this unfavorable press image, noting: “When you go to court, you’re the one who looks like the bastard.” While humane officials, in a few articles, acknowledge the sadness of hoarders when their animals are confiscated, most articles do not report the feelings of animal control officers about the plight of hoarders’ animals—feelings that might soften the media image of these officials. In one of the few articles to describe such feelings, the animal control officer said, regarding two hundred sick rabbits confined to small, unsanitary sheds: “It made me very, very sick. Because I’m an animal lover, it made me very, very sad because they couldn’t get out. They were imprisoned in there.” Less emphatic was one humane official who said that the hoarder’s situation was “upsetting to anyone who cares at all about animals.”
Media coverage can elicit public criticism of humane societies and their employees. In one case picked up by the media, a woman with eighty cats and two dogs moved to a motel with her animals because she claimed her water pipes had burst. Since the motel permitted only one pet per rented room, the hoarder surreptitiously smuggled her animals into the room. The motel staff had no idea that the animals were there because the woman declined maid service and the animals were not inside the rooms long enough to create an odor. A motel spokesperson claimed that had the hoarder been there a full week they would have smelled the animals. Tipped off that there might be a problem, officers entered the motel room, where they found “wall to wall cats.” Although one newspaper article quoted an officer as saying the cats “were quiet and friendly. Most of them didn’t seem sickly,” they were seized by law enforcement officers from the local humane society and taken to shelters for evaluation. One person on the scene who was not a law enforcement officer said, “It will have to be determined which cats are healthy enough to keep alive. That’s their call. I would hope that the decision would be made fairly quickly so that the cats won’t have to suffer.” However, all were found to be extremely sick (rotted-out eyes, leukemia, respiratory illnesses, ringworm, and other parasites) with very bad prognoses, and they were unsocialized. Despite humane society press statements noting that it was always their goal to save animals and make them available for adoption, all were “destroyed” because they had an extremely low possibility of adoption even if a lot of money and time were spent on making them healthy, and they would use much-needed cage space. Media coverage alerted concerned animal people, who read the story and became outraged that the humane society would kill all of these cats. Headlines in local newspapers included, “Animals Found in Motel Destroyed.”

Press coverage of this bad case created a number of problems. In one letter to the editor, an irate citizen decried the destruction of the cats, writing “It is unfortunate that the humane society, with its vast resources, felt it expedient to put these animals to death rather than treating those that might have been curable.” Other people threatened to stop making donations to the society, and these threats continued for months after this news broke. Feeling the need to respond to this public outcry and criticism of the seizing of these cats and their subsequent destruction, supporters of the agents and the society wrote a number of
letters to the editor and op-ed articles to defend their actions. These letters and articles reiterated the society’s position that their destruction of the cats was not a cruel, heartless act but rather an act of mercy. “Our mission,” a member of the society wrote, “is to help reduce animal suffering, and the cats were euthanized purely out of humaneness to them.” In another response, the author tried to create some sympathy for the officers by making it clear that the hoarder victimized the animals: “It is not unusual for law enforcement officers . . . to wear protective gear to mask the stench caused by the accumulated mix of feces and urine of dozens, even hundreds of cats or dogs crammed into houses. Pathetic pictures of rescue raids show them crammed into spaces no larger than a phone booth or in stacked filthy cages often deprived of light and human companionship. Hoarders obtain their victims, for victims they are, by any means, often taking household pets that are ‘let out’ in the belief that they are being rescued.”

Such defenses, however, may do little to allay the concern of some people that hoarders are being unfairly pressured to relinquish their animals. Indeed, in the wake of charges suggesting the culpability of agents and shelter workers, along with news that questions the extent to which animal suffering occurs in these cases, if at all, readers are likely to be confused about animal hoarding—how wrong it is and how hoarders should be seen. Further confusing readers are defenses by hoarders themselves.

**SAINTLY ACCOUNTS**

In the public arena, there is little room for the hoarder’s voice because it is overshadowed by the opinions of various authorities whose presumed expertise trumps the occasional defense of hoarding. Nevertheless, hoarders are not passive actors who watch on the sidelines as the press constructs a confused and unflattering identity for them; instead, they confront it head on as they strive to refashion pity into praise, horror into honor. Hoarders resist professional knowledge, despite its widespread legitimacy, by reasserting who they think they are and why they believe that others “have it wrong.” These presentations of self are not constructed in a social vacuum but are shaped by what hoarders learn through interaction with others. At least in a general way, they discover how society defines animal neglect and regards those accused of it. They
also learn culturally derived vocabularies of motive that diminish responsibility or deny wrongdoing (Mills 1940). These excuses or justifications enable them to frame their behavior in a positive light or cast aspersions on law enforcement officials and others, just as do members of any group whose identities are questioned or stigmatized (Lyman and Scott 1970).

Given the derisiveness of “expert” views of hoarders, we would expect them to use these vocabularies of motive to counter with a more amenable self-image—one that they can live with and use in their interactions with others. They transform what others see as neglect into something positive by portraying themselves as saviors of unwanted and helpless animals for whom they make huge but worthy sacrifices so that these needy animals can have better lives. In their talk they imply that their behavior is saintly. Although hoarders merely insinuate their saintliness, it underlies and informs how they characterize their feelings about and actions toward animals.

Hoarders portray themselves as saviors who are on a rescue mission to save animals from death or euthanasia. They believe that only they come through for animals in need, seeing themselves as the last outpost for many animals that would have nowhere else to go and no one else to care for them. Most see it as a “duty” and feel “guilty” if they turn their backs. One viewed her acquisition of scores of dogs and cats as a “wake-up call” from a higher power to help animals: “Well, God, this is the way you made me. You made me to love animals and I’m proud of it. It’s not something that I need to make excuses for. I don’t hurt people, you know.” Hoarders see homeless animals as “abused” and say, in the words of one, they “cannot live knowing that they are being abused and not taken care of.” Hoarders worry, indeed a few say they are “terrified,” that something tragic will happen to animals—cars will hit them or “butchers” will sell them to medical labs—if they fail to act.

For example, a man found living with sixty dogs and two cats claimed that nine dogs were his, while the remainder belonged to people who asked him to care for them. “It was a goodwill gesture. I want those animals to live. I’d rather be put to sleep myself,” he said. Another hoarder of thirty-one cats said he did not take the felines to the animal shelter because he wanted to prevent their euthanasia. “I love animals and I don’t feel any animal should be put to death,” he said, citing religious reasons. And the owner of sixty-four pit bulls and a Rottweiler
claimed: “That was my family. I took care of dogs people were trying to kill.” For hoarders, then, death is an unthinkable option; any other possibility, not matter how horrific, is better for the animals.

Hoarders feel highly responsible for the welfare of animals in general by maintaining vague and shifting boundaries between their animals and others. Almost any animal they encounter can easily be seen as “their own” and one they feel an obligation to help. Their sense of responsibility also comes from having a very broad and ambiguous definition of what constitutes a “needy” animal, and therefore one that should be helped. This perspective guarantees many situations that call for their intervention. There are always strays to be found and helped or unwanted animals from friends or strangers to be taken in. Shelters, too, offer unlimited numbers of animal “projects,” as one hoarder calls them, to provide homes for the unadoptable. Some hoarders even feel responsible for the welfare of wildlife in need of shelter or care. As one observes about the endless number of animals waiting for her care: “It could go on forever. If one came to my door, I’d take it in.” The result is that hoarders have endless opportunities to feel selfless, and they take advantage of many.

Hoarders provide dramatic accounts of rescuing and caring for animals. Their talk becomes very animated when they describe how much effort, emotion, patience, time, and money went into saving tragically injured, sick, or troubled animals that survive dire conditions. One hoarder recounted staying up all night to nurse stray kittens and another detailed how she followed one of her feral cats into its underground burrow and took food to it for over a month until it decided to come out. These excursions to save the cat from starving to death left the hoarder infested with fleas that she passed on to other people in her home. For weeks another hoarder nursed a dog with a broken pelvis, convinced that the local shelter would immediately destroy it if given the opportunity.

Many hoarders portray themselves as operating shelter or rescue organizations. One hoarder claimed that she performed a “community service by taking in stray animals” and “saved quite a few lives of some of those cats.” Several said that they were trying to place some or many of their animals in other homes, only temporarily keeping them until these arrangements could be made. In one case in which eighteen emaciated dogs were seized from a home, the hoarder explained to
authorities that she was starting her own humane society. Sometimes they claimed to do this because existing shelters provided poor animal care in their opinion. A hoarder of more than twenty-four dogs told reporters that after she rescues dogs from bad “pounds,” she gives them shots and adequate nutrition. Other hoarders specifically use “no-kill” terminology to describe their animal work. When thirty-nine cats were discovered living in horrible conditions, the hoarder said she was trying to establish a no-kill shelter. “I am not a collector, people said I was a collector because I refused to associate with shelters that euthanize.” By claiming to be rescue or humane organizations, hoarders frame their acts as kind hearted and benevolent, caring for animals that no one else will help or save. They tell themselves, and others, that their behavior is reasonable or, in some instances, morally admirable.

In keeping with their saintly presentation, hoarders make many sacrifices to rescue animals. In their own eyes, they are what Rosenhan (1970) calls autonomous altruists, or those who, to a much greater degree than others, forgo many things and undergo great labor to aid people, or in this instance animals. Those who believe the hoarders’ efforts at self-presentation might view hoarders in a positive light (Heckert 2003) and offer them social approval because hoarding, like the behavior of saints and good neighbors (Sorokin 1950) or the unselfishness of heroes (Scarpitti and McFarlane 1975), involves self-sacrifice and does not threaten society. However, it is more likely that even if hoarders’ accounts are believed by others, they will still be regarded negatively because their sacrifices are so extreme.

One hoarder calls such sacrifices her “hardship” and lists not being able to go far from home, never having a clean and neat house or yard, never having undamaged material possessions, and having no social life. Another hoarder laments her inability to travel on vacation because no one can take care of her many animals and because she would never use a kennel; another cites the inability to have a “neat” house and yard because of her animals’ habits, another the loss of her antique furniture and hand-knotted rugs because of urine saturation, and yet another the fact that the potent smell of her cats prevents visitors, including her best friend and sister, from entering her home. Indeed, several hoarders say that they miss their human friendships, although animal friendships replace them. In short, they diminish their horizons and forgo their desires, except those related to animals. Like saints, they eschew
worldly wants and personal possessions in the name of having many unfettered animals. Spurning worldly or middle-class desires for the greater good of helping animals echoes the belief in communist societies that renouncing the strife for individual property benefits others, though the one benefits animals and the other humans. To hoarders, curtailing everyday pleasures for the sake of their animals is not a political statement, it is just something that is seen as “more worthwhile.” As one hoarder says, she would rather spend all of her money on her animals than on herself.

One sacrifice, withdrawing from the social life of the community, is justified as necessary to protect animals from seizure by authorities. Hoarders explain, sometimes accurately, that humane law enforcement agents or animal control officers disapprove of their treatment of animals and want to remove them from their homes. They describe constant attacks by aggressive and insensitive officials, implying that the problem rests with those who seek to take their animals rather than with themselves. “Demonic” was the description of one local humane society. “I give those cats the best food money can buy. Whenever I’m away I have people taking care of the cats. Those people [humane society] are just out to ruin me. . . . All was going well until the humane society moved in.” Feeling harassed, one hoarder proclaimed, “Why don’t they just leave us alone?” Another hoarder insisted that a humane agent threatened her, “saying he would get me and all of these animals would be euthanized.” And another frustrated hoarder said, “They’ve been on us like locusts. . . . He [a town official] just says anything. I have no sick or miserable animals here. . . . We’re doing our level best.”

They are victims, according to hoarders and their supporters. Friends of one hoarder considered her to be a “victim of constant hounding from county officials and neighboring ranchers—adversaries who color her strange for devoting her life to helping wayward animals.” A neighbor defended another hoarder as someone who is eccentric but loves animals: “He’s kind of different and sometimes people try to take advantage of him. In this case, he’s kind of getting railroaded. It seems like the humane society is on a witch hunt.” Hoarders claimed that officials or humane societies had personal vendettas against them. In a case where more than 150 dogs, 14 cats, 3 monkeys, and a pregnant pot-bellied pig were discovered living in squalid conditions, the hoarder charged that she was being harassed without reason. She
claimed that police bruised her wrists and breasts and treated her elderly mother with no respect. “For 12 hours I sat in jail, treated like a criminal,” she said.

Feeling unfairly persecuted by those who endanger their social world with animals, hoarders tragically depict what would happen if authorities seized animals. These declarations testify to the importance of keeping their animals and the harm of losing them. A few even threaten to kill themselves or others if their animals are taken.

In response to perceived persecution hoarders adopt a siege mentality, hiding from their neighbors and the community at large. One confided that she erected a seven-foot stockade fence as much to keep people out as to keep animals in. By having a low profile, they hope to keep secret the numbers of animals they have and the unsightliness of their property. Loss of social life, although psychologically costly, is one more worthy sacrifice in their eyes, although to some extent this low profile continues a life-long withdrawal from social interaction in general.

With an attitude of saintly martyrdom, hoarders bemoan these sacrifices but point out that it is not worth having nice furniture or taking long vacations if they come at their animals’ expense. What they give up is justified in their opinion because they can do so much for animals. As one says, her sense of worth and happiness comes from “making their crummy lives decent.” And they claim that animals do so much for them, even becoming their social life. In the words of a hoarder: “We just get our friendship from the animals. We don’t miss the human friendship because we are always with the animals.”

Hoarders resign themselves to these sacrifices and normalize them in their lives. Best typifying this attitude is one person who ceded her kitchen to thirty cats so they could have it as their territory for eating, playing, and excreting. She, nevertheless, still used the kitchen, at great inconvenience from an outsider’s perspective but not hers. The woman grew accustomed to—in fact advocated the benefits of—no longer sitting down for meals in the kitchen, and instead merely stood at the open refrigerator door and quickly grazed on whatever she grabbed “to get it over with,” while her son had grown comfortable taking his food out of the refrigerator and closing himself in the adjoining bathroom with a hotplate and a juicer so that their cats would not interrupt his meals and soil his food, plates, and utensils.
Normalizing sacrifices leads hoarders to relinquish their human identity and become animalized. That their identity can be so profoundly affected is unsurprising, given the importance of animals to hoarders; it shapes who they think they are and how they behave. At one extreme are those who take on animal alters, although this falls short of the alternate animal personalities experienced by individuals with multiple-personality disorders (Hendrickson, McCarty, and Goodwin 1990).

Their animalization inverts the traditional priority placed on human concerns over those of animals, with greater importance placed on the latter. One hoarder showed an awareness of this inversion after a fire in her home killed some of her animals: “I wanted to die because I felt that I just wanted to be with them. It’s funny that you would want to be with your pets more than your husband and kids but that’s how I felt [near crying]. We lived near a lake. For a long time, I wanted to walk into the lake and drown.” She also recalled a dream about another fire that gutted her home and some of the animals in it. “I said to my son, ‘Oh thank God the dogs are okay.’ You know, most people would say, ‘Oh, your house didn’t burn down.’” Inversion is also revealed when hoarders weigh the relative importance of human and animal life. Responding to a local tragedy where a woman killed her eighteen-month-old child and pets, the hoarder said: “When people say, ‘did you hear about that girl who killed her baby and her dogs,’ I would hear about that lady who killed her dogs and her baby. Do you follow me? I’ve got to watch myself because people who don’t understand me might think that I don’t value human life, which is not true. But to me, it was more devastating that she killed her dogs.” Sometimes this inversion is over more prosaic priorities. For example, one hoarder said: “When I punch the clock at night I don’t think I’m going home to see my husband and kids. I think I’m going home and little Betty is going to be there and we’re going to go out for a walk. She understands me.”

This inversion resets the authority relationship between humans and animals, giving hoarders, compared with most pet owners in American society, much less control over animals. They relinquish some of their autonomy and decision-making ability, indeed a substantial amount in a few cases, for the sake of their animals’ needs and whims and because they see their animals as having the right, like humans, to be free and
exercise choice. One hoarder goes so far as to say that her animals “run” her life; another asserts that “their needs” determine everything she does.

Hoarders do not train animals and impose few rules on them so their authentic personalities can emerge. As one said: “I give them a lot more freedom than rules. I don’t expect them to be something or anything in particular for me. I pretty much let them be who they are.” By not regulating the behavior of animals, hoarders compromise the quality of their daily lives from the perspective of general community standards. For example, they might make one or two rooms off-limits to animals, but even these supposedly sequestered rooms are often overrun, disordered, and soiled by animals. Hoarders also hope to confine their animals’ elimination to certain rooms, although typically there are scores of dirty litter boxes throughout houses and “mistakes” are common. In some cases, the floors of every room are completely soiled. Animals also may be allowed free run of kitchens, even when humans try to eat, resulting in massive swarming of both people and food. With no effort to train them or control their behavior, some hoarders strive to maintain a “peaceable kingdom” among their animals by monitoring and managing their aggressive behavior so that fellow animals are not harmed.

By not controlling their animals, hoarders challenge the cultural category of pet and the treatment of animals as lesser creatures. In fact, many flatly deny that they regard their animals as pets. As one hoarder maintains, people should not treat their animals as humanlike and “love” only a few. Although some hoarders claim to have a few “favorite” animals, and they can often identify many by name, they tend to relate to their animals as though they have a corporate identity rather than interacting with them as traditional pets. Not surprisingly, some hoarders admit they rarely play with their animals, also blaming this on the volume of animals or the difficulty of interacting with feral cats.

From the hoarders’ perspective, having many animals is not a leisure pursuit, distinguishing them from people who collect things as hobbies. Of course, like hoarders, hobbyists can be deeply committed to their activities, but they do not lose sight of the fact that they are pursing leisure. And like hoarders, some hobbyists are involved in morally controversial activities; gun collectors, for example, are forced to develop various accounts and justifications for their interests to deal with public reproach for what they find fun to do (Eddy 1988). But they are hobbies rather than missions; passions rather than obsessions; diversions rather than causes.
According to hoarders, regular pet owners are hobbyists because their involvement with animals is just about “love” rather than part of a larger mission to care for them. Having companions is not the issue for hoarders. Some say that their feelings for animals “go beyond love.” “I have a feeling,” one said, “that you need to protect them because the need is great. You certainly can’t keep them out there by themselves to fend for themselves. You can’t do that.” As another hoarder says about the dog her sister’s family kept: “They have love, it’s like their child. There’s a lot of people that will love their animals and treat it like a human— there’s a distinction, though. I mean, it’s just not love, it’s a caring, it’s something deep.”

Far from their image of pet owners, then, hoarders’ saintly self-presentations starkly contrast with the press’s negative portrayal of them as criminal, mentally ill, or pitiful. No doubt, these contradictory images can confuse more than clarify the reader’s understanding of animal hoarding. Readers are likely to react to this inconsistent mix of information with shock and horror, but also with fascination. Understanding why readers might be fascinated points to an unexpected use of news stories about cruelty.

**News as Ritual Moral Exercise**

The allure to readers of the upside-down and out-of-control world of hoarders is similar to the appeal of crime news in general. The value of these stories comes from their ability to raise questions and doubts about the social order rather than from their celebration of society’s triumph over deviance and disorder. By raising fundamental questions about everyday existence, these stories can connect to and bear on reader’s own lives and problems. They do this by providing material for a “ritual moral exercise” where, according to Katz (1987, 67), readers reflect on and mull over issues of personal competence and sensibilities that are often dramatized in crime news. From this reflection, people develop a moral perspective that can help them deal with the fear of miscalculating their own and others’ abilities.

This moral exercise, however, can do more than merely shore up questions of competence. Crime news also raises issues about personal and collective identity that key into everyday fears about how well people fit into their neighborhoods or work scenes, as well as more
existential concerns about what makes them any better than anyone else. All of us, not just hoarders, face questions of belonging and identity. While the news will not tell readers who they are or how they are different from others, it provides the fodder to develop a perspective that will do so. This perspective is formed as readers locate themselves within a repertoire of emplotted stories. Such identity work is an ongoing dynamic between individuals and culture, or in this case readers and the news, where people come to know who they are by first comparing themselves with others and then by either excluding or including them in their own group.

Hoarders raise doubts about the sanctity of the social order. American values and beliefs that are assumed to be taken for granted cannot be, at least when it comes to hoarders. Thus, through these stories the media does not reproduce the status quo, as do other institutions (e.g., Foley 1990), but challenges it. Readers are reminded that things are not always the “way they ought to be” in society. Specifically, reports about hoarders question the endurance and importance of conventional values regarding human-animal relationships, domestic life, and civil obligation.

For one, news stories detail behaviors that blur interspecies boundaries, with hoarders routinely crossing lines that many people expect and uphold when it comes to presumed differences between humans and other animals. Indeed, their acts often violate taboos about inappropriate behavior toward animals. As they do so, hoarders become animalized, abandoning trappings associated with modern, civilized life. And these boundary crossings are likely to disturb many readers, despite growing interest in according animals ever higher moral status in society, whether by improving welfare standards, acknowledging sentience and intelligence, or granting legal rights (Franklin 1999).

These reports rarely reassure readers about this phylogenetic breech of the social order or reaffirm the traditional place of animals in society by clarifying moral and social distinctions between species. One story that did, however, involved a hoarder who allegedly owned fifty-four starving and dehydrated dogs and cats along with five dead cats, some of which were being consumed by other cats. The article suggests that the court’s failure to punish this hoarder was due to the lesser social value of animals compared with that of humans. When the defendant
argued that her animals “were like my children,” the judge retorted: “If these were your children, you’d be going to jail for a long time.” Of course, other reasons could account for this courtroom response; judges’ inaction may reflect the fact that animal cruelty is considered only a misdemeanor in many states and that animal hoarding as a psychological problem is poorly understood at present.

Middle-class norms also are commonly violated in news stories about hoarding, assaulting what mainstream America holds dear when it comes to standards of cleanliness and order, friendliness and civic duty, responsibility and moderation (e.g., Tittle and Paternoster 2003; Wolfe 1998). Details of hoarders’ life-styles defile what many readers assume is minimally civilized behavior in modern society. Indeed, their denial of middle-class morality is so extreme, readers might have almost a prurient interest in these reports because the behavior of hoarders verges on being a class obscenity.

For example, middle-class expectations dictate that one has the right to privacy and exclusive control of personal items, while still being minimally responsible to oneself, one’s dependents, and one’s home. However, generally assumed standards of cleanliness and order (Hoy 1996), even when generously defined, are routinely violated in articles about hoarding. Reports also portray hoarders as irresponsible to family members, whether human or animal. Certainly, accusing hoarders of extreme animal neglect and abuse points to their violation of this norm; they have taken advantage of their privacy to harm others. And there are occasional reports of elderly parents or children who suffer neglect as well.

Also, there are middle-class norms for being neighborly and civil. Yet reports show hoarders disregarding the presence of others when it comes to maintaining physical property and the surrounding environment. They infringe on the lifestyles of neighbors, for example, when the dilapidation of their homes and yards spreads next door or their animals’ defecation and destruction results in unpleasant sounds, sights, or smells that easily offend those nearby. Hoarders also withdraw from neighborhood social life. Many accounts detail their clandestine ways, describing them as loners or reclusive people. They are guilty of alienation, having no acceptable excuse.

A final example is the middle-class norm that encourages moderation over excessiveness. The numbers of animals kept by hoarders and
the disarray of their homes grossly violate public expectations for the prosaic and moderate. Such practices tread on the belief that extremes of any kind are unacceptable. Even their apparent lying seems immoderate; there are middle-class limits for tolerating deceitfulness, including the scale or extent of lying. Cover-ups that involve double lives, especially if the weak and helpless are exploited or harmed, are condemned. The very claim by hoarders that their actions are altruistic if not saintly is itself an affront to the value placed on honesty, and may be seen as an admission of glaring irrationality that does not hold them in better stead.

Throughout these reports of species and class violations there is a lack of closure. Society does not triumph over this form of deviance and restore the social order. There is no great celebration or relief because hoarders have been caught; various authorities seem puzzled about how to deal with them, or even how to categorize them, and sometimes there is public outrage directed at law enforcement agencies or shelters. Reading articles about hoarders gives the impression that they rarely appear in court and those who do are rarely punished, except for having future ownership of animals restricted, being required to undergo counseling, or being forced out of their homes to cleaner and safer locations. In part, this impression is due to the style of reporting crime news. “Breaking” stories that cover the apprehension of deviants and early criminal proceedings are favored over those that report trial outcomes. It also is due to the reluctance to impose sentences on hoarders either because the “crime” or “illness” is thought to be unserious or because court officials and other authorities are unsure how best to manage this problem.

The lack of closure leaves these reports raising more questions about the integrity of the social order than providing a sense of moral consensus or resolution. If they do not reassure readers, then what is their appeal? What is in them that readers find interesting to consider? Certainly, as a form of crime news, there is nothing to be gained. There is no information that can protect readers from harm, since few are likely to live near hoarders; and in the unlikely chance that some do, nothing is provided that can reduce the threat of harm to them. Indeed, it is not clear in the latter case that there is any danger posed other than possible damage to neighborhood aesthetics or real estate values.
Nevertheless, the public finds these news stories interesting at a personal level. There are moral tales within these reports that enable readers to work through existential dilemmas relating to boundaries thought to separate them from other people and animals. These reports provoke readers to ask questions about what it means to be human and civilized, to be a good and responsible neighbor, a fit parent or animal owner—questions far removed from the content of the news stories but close to their own anxieties and worries. How far should I go in trying to befriend the family next door? Am I going a little “overboard” by caring too much for my two cats? Does it really matter if I keep my lawn so well manicured? Why do I want certain things and not others? What do I keep secret and would others care to know? Do any of my actions harm others? And in asking and then answering these questions readers can sustain their belief that their own identities, as well as their place in society, are beyond reproach.

SAINTLINESS AND PERSONAL ORDER

Hoarders, too, are working through dilemmas they face in their everyday lives—dilemmas relating to the need to balance chaos with order, instability with stability. That their saintly presentation provides this balance stems from the nature of animal hoarding as opposed to so-called rational hoarding. Rational hoarding has been observed in periods of uncertainty and scarce resources caused by economic failure or military siege. During the Great Depression in the United States, hoarding was a way to cope with the inability to obtain needed goods. The fear engendered by uncertainty and scarcity even continued among depression-era survivors whose acquisition of material objects was less rational. A similar response to uncertainty and deprivation has been reported among those who withstand prolonged military invasion, like the residents of Stalingrad who faced an extended attack on their city by German soldiers, or those who have been forcibly ghettoized, like the citizens of Warsaw in the Second World War.

Animal hoarding’s use is similar to the use of hoarding inanimate objects by people confined in institutions. In such circumstances, acquiring material objects is an identity-creating device that gives order, stability, and continuity to otherwise shapeless identities (Csikszentmihalyi
People who are uprooted from familiar places, and find themselves powerless, disoriented, and without possessions, can hoard objects to rebuild a new sense of self. Prisoners, for example, go to great lengths to acquire and keep almost anything following their dislocation from the outside world. Some of these acquisitions are rational, for example, if the item can be bartered or refashioned into a useful object, but acquisitions also allow prisoners to reestablish their identities by having something—and all the better if they and others regard the objects as important. Likewise, patients in mental institutions often become “pack rats” as a way to form an identity in a place that strips away their former selves without replacing them with new ones (Goffman 1961). The more possessions one acquires, the more identity one can amass under such deprived and changed circumstances. This is also true for uprooted survivors of natural disasters and for people placed in nursing homes who discover the meaning and use of possessions only after they are lost (e.g., Erikson 1976).

Most hoarders fit this profile, having psychological and social histories beginning in childhood that are chaotic, anomic, and marginal (Worth and Beck 1981). The vast majority report feelings of insecurity and disruptive experiences in early life, including frequent relocations, parental separation and divorce, and isolation from peers. As adults, they tend to be single, employed part-time, and without close ties to friends, neighbors, community organizations, or larger social institutions. Animals are for hoarders their primary or only connection to others, albeit nonhuman.

Amassing large numbers of animals reproduces and reinforces their earlier chaotic and marginal life. The disorder and isolation, however, can provide order and purpose in the personal lives of hoarders only if they define their activities in socially desirable ways. Accounts of saintly behavior toward animals provide a bridge to a larger culture that praises extreme instances of helping others, especially when they come at great cost to the helpers. Consumed by their consumption, hoarders build their saintly self-images in ways that transform what others see as appalling neglect into something that feels more familiar than strange, more comforting than distressing, more kind than cruel.