Identity, Gender, and Tracking

Vermilya, Jenny R.

Published by Purdue University Press

Vermilya, Jenny R.
Identity, Gender, and Tracking: The Reality of Boundaries for Veterinary Students.
Purdue University Press, 2022.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94379.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94379

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3030473
PART 1

THE BACKSTORY
AAlthough what we consider different species of animals stems in part from biology, the difference is also the product of social construction. The category of species has real consequences for the treatment of animals and for the humans who interact with them. These consequences play out prominently in the profession of veterinary medicine and reveal themselves in what is referred to as a tracking system used in veterinary training. Briefly, tracking allows veterinary students to specialize in particular areas of animal medicine and focus on specific species.

This project uses tracking systems in veterinary medicine as a case study in the creation and maintenance of, as well as the changes to, the boundaries surrounding different animal species. By using veterinary medical education as a site to understand the manifestation of boundaries, this study contributes to several bodies of literature. Specifically, it engages with the literature that analyzes the maintenance of specialty knowledge and the resulting privileging of such knowledge. It also adds to the research on collective identity work done by animal caregivers, revealing how boundaries, borders, and cases that do not fit within boundaries can separate this work. In addition, by providing a gendered analysis, it enhances the understanding of each of these instances of boundary work.

In this chapter I first introduce the literature on boundaries and borders. I then explain how, in this research, the social construction of species will constitute a
Part 1.

The Backstory

particular type of boundary work. I go on to describe how the tracking system in many veterinary colleges represents similar divisions, then conclude by presenting the goals and questions for this research project.

BOUNDARIES AND BORDERS

Abundant research in the social sciences examines the related concepts of boundaries and borders. Informed by the literature outlined here, I use the term “boundaries” to refer to the invisible lines veterinary students create and maintain around species, medical practices, knowledge, identities, and gender. I use the term “borders” to refer to the spaces along or close to the boundary lines that students admit are characterized by unclear ambiguity but also flexible potential for changeability. In doing so, I build on the work of Eviatar Zerubavel (1991), who describes boundaries as the “mental fences” (p. 2) that we place around geographic regions, temporal distance, historical events, ideas, groups, and other phenomena so that they seem similar, contiguous, or somehow related (see also Zerubavel, 1996). Along with others in the boundary literature, Zerubavel argues that clear, objective lines do not exist around any domain or “slice of reality” (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474; see also Michaelson & Johnson, 1997; Nippert-Eng, 1996a, 1996b). As he puts it, the “islands of meaning” that result from the boundary creation process “are not part of nature” (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 442). He defends the flexibility and ambiguity in social life and challenges the notion that boundaries are essentialized truths. Similarly, Barbara J. Morehouse (2004) describes borderlands as “spaces where the everyday realities of boundaries are played out” and “where cultural identity, sheltered by the boundary, becomes blurred, mixed, creolized” (p. 19). While bounded spaces can appear well defined and securely enclosed, borders along those boundaries can often be ambiguous and unclear. Morehouse (2004) and other scholars who focus on social and collective identities study how boundaries create differentiation between us and them (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 1996). People create collective identities through a process of internal and external definitions; individuals must internally distinguish themselves from others through a sense of belonging to their group, but external others must also recognize this distinction in order for a collective identity to emerge (Jenkins, 1996). Henri Tajfel’s (1982) classic work on social identity
theory made in-groups and out-groups important social psychological concepts. He noted that in-groups discriminate against out-groups to improve their own self-image. Similarly, Robert Merton (1972) used the term “reference groups” to describe how groups use one another to compare and contrast characteristics to evaluate themselves.

This study contributes to and extends these fields of thought by introducing in-groups and out-groups that exist within a larger in-group. For example, I will show how the specialties in veterinary medicine provide enough difference for veterinary students to discriminate against one another, even though they still consider themselves unified under the title of future veterinarian. In this way, boundaries assist in the creation of identities, while borders can allow for new variations of identities to exist.

Extensions of the use of boundaries in creating different categories and subsequent identities focus on the consequences of these differences. For instance, work on geographies of exclusion examines access to resources associated with membership in certain groups (Sibley, 1995). Boundaries around group membership not only distinguish and separate categories but can contribute to inequality that comes from defining difference and attaching value to those differences. This inequality becomes particularly clear in class, ethnic and racial, and gender and sexual categories. For example, Pierre Bourdieu's (1979/1984) work on class boundaries focused on how cultural capital—the knowledge of the culture of the dominant class—awards privilege. The boundaries between those who possess varying degrees of cultural capital help shape the different social classes. Fredrick Barth (1969) similarly used a relational approach with ethnicity. Instead of defining ethnicity simply as shared culture, Barth claimed that we define ethnic membership in opposition to the perceived identities of other ethnic groups. Therefore, we define ethnic difference by understanding the boundaries of different groups and our own relation to them. Gendered categorization also relies heavily on boundaries. The unconscious, but constant, boundary construction of the binaries of masculine and feminine helps explain gender inequality (Ridgeway, 1997). When gender falls in a border zone, such as when individuals violate gender norms or when ambiguous cases exist outside of the binary system (e.g., intersex or transgender individuals), stigmatization and punishment follow (Epstein, 2006; Norton & Herek, 2013). Here, boundaries and borders lead to inequality.
From a functionalist perspective, boundaries serve to organize bodies of knowledge. Specifically, scholars have studied the creation of professions and academic disciplines through this boundary work; further, they have recognized how these boundaries create additional divisions between experts and laypeople (Abbott, 1981, 2014; Collins, 1979; Foucault, 2002; Sarfatti-Larson, 1979). Others expanded this notion of institutionalizing difference and alternatively suggested that boundaries not only act as dividers but also can act as communication interfaces in the form of boundary objects (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star & Griesemer, 1989). Boundary objects can be material objects, organizational forms, conceptual spaces, or procedures. They can facilitate exchanges across communities; in this case study, for example, they can facilitate exchanges across subfields within animal medicine. The concept of boundary objects has broadened the conversation on boundaries and borders to include not only distinction and exclusion but also connection and inclusion. Coordinated social action can occur through the bridging across boundaries that boundary objects provide, and potentially lead to social change.

Human-animal studies scholars have applied the border metaphor to explain how constructed boundaries shape and influence human-animal interactions. Geographers Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel (1998) use the concept of the border to examine how “permeable border zones of metropolitan regions inhabited by both people and animals” represent “zones of potential coexistence” (p. xvii). For example, the category of city-dwellers can include both humans and wildlife. As geographers, Wolch and Emel “examine cases of negotiation/struggle over sharing space” (p. xvii). In their research, borders are physical places, whereas I additionally situate borders in human cultural thought. While the physical places animals reside affect their use by humans, the border spaces that they occupy in the human imagination are a result of much more than simply physical location; they have to do with constructed social meanings. Importantly, places on the margin “are never simply locations. Rather, they are sites for someone and of something” (Shields, 1991, p. 6; emphasis added). Similar extensions of animal geography focus on the social definitions of animals and their additional placement in human imaginings (Philo & Wilbert, 2000).

Each of these schools of thought on the subject of boundaries and borders, including those that investigate collective identities, the consequent inequality, the social organization of knowledge, and human-animal relationships, contribute to this study of the consequences of boundaries and borders in the field of veterinary medicine.
BOUNDARY WORK AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SPECIES

I was much struck how entirely vague and arbitrary is the distinction between species and varieties.

— CHARLES DARWIN (1859, p. 48)

Human-animal studies scholarship that focuses on the role of boundaries in the social construction of species is particularly applicable to the ways that veterinary medicine also performs boundary work. To begin, the designation of species connotes not only a position in taxonomy but also how humans regard the beings who occupy that position. What humans understand as distinct species are actually matters of debate. Biologist Ernst Mayr (1942) first noted that scientists use different “species concepts” to place an animal into a species category. Species concepts represent the differing interpretations of different biologists, consequently creating a “species problem” that states that taxonomy is not entirely objective (Hey, 2006; Pigliucci & Kaplan, 2010). Thus, we socially construct animals in the academic discipline of biology, and then we further construct them when we place social value on species categories. In analyzing the attribution of social value on species, Arnold Arluke and Clinton R. Sanders (1996) termed the resulting hierarchy “the sociozoologic scale.” They argue that “‘being’ an animal in modern societies may be less a matter of biology than it is an issue of human culture and consciousness” (p. 9).

Although some scholars (see Singer, 1975) have attributed placement in the hierarchy to consumption practices, the sociozoologic scale categorizes animals according to whether humans designate animals as morally good or bad. The animals considered best fall just below us on the sociozoologic scale. We grant these animals a nearly human status, and we describe some of them as companion animals or pets (Bryant, 2007; Gardyn, 2001; Veevers, 1985; Vitulli, 2006). We expect companion animals to be subservient to us, to provide us with love and affection (Tuan, 1984), and to adjust their behavior to fit into human spaces (e.g., becoming housebroken). Good animals also include those used as tools in research laboratories, on farms and ranches, or in occupations such as those involving therapy. We do not see these animals as family members, but they still have a collectively defined, instrumental function within society (see also Cassuto, 2007; Wilkie, 2005). We construct animals within the tools category as either scientific data or food (Arluke, 1988; Phillips, 1994; Ryder, 1975; Thompson, 1983; Vialles,
Using them in these ways requires that they “be deanthropomorphized, becoming lesser beings or objects that think few thoughts, feel only the most primitive emotions, and experience little pain” (Arluke & Sanders, 1996, p. 173). This requires using language that designates the animal metaphorically—that is, referring to them as supplies or assigning them numbers instead of names (see also Dess & Chapman, 1998; Phillips, 1994).

Animals considered problematic in human society rank below the good animals on the sociozoologic scale. Bad animals appear to serve no positive role in society through companionship or as some type of tool, such as the pigeons so common in cities (Jerolmack, 2008). Some bad animals considered vermin invade spaces designated for human use. Others, such as the freak, blur the boundaries of human and animal. Freaks most famously existed in carnival sideshows, where exhibits displayed humans with animallike features as anomalies and subjected them to ridicule. Finally, demons fall at the bottom of the scale, depicted as the predators and fiends who serve no purpose other than malice. For example, we have demonized the pit bull breeds as the most vicious of dogs, as though these breeds are inherently malevolent and wicked.

Some species can shift statuses, making the transition from good to bad, and vice versa. For example, some protected exotic species previously were dangerous animals, such as the big cats who perform in circuses, magic shows, and even car commercials. Harold Herzog (1988) has noted how mice can be pets, wildlife, pests, tools in research, or food for predator species kept as pets, such as snakes. Moreover, individual animals can shift statuses within categories. For example, farmers sometimes name their cattle and sheep, and sometimes a favored animal will gain the status of pet (Wilkie, 2010). They might later eat them or send them to slaughter. Thus, the status of petted livestock is often transitory. Animals so designated can regain their instrumental status as commodity.

Consistent with these observations of boundary crossing on the sociozoologic scale, in my fieldwork I witnessed a case where an animal transitioned from tool to companion. One of the veterinary students I interviewed took me on a tour of the large animal teaching hospital barn while he was on duty. In one stall lay a dairy cow named Meadow. Her owners, who viewed her as a companion animal, had named her. They had purchased her from a rancher after seeing her injured in a field. The injury left no option except amputation of her hind legs, making her unprofitable for the rancher. The new owners rescued her and turned her into a pet. Meadow was at the teaching hospital because she had just undergone a rare surgery. She received prosthetic hind legs. I learned that this type of procedure,
while perhaps more common for small animals (i.e., companions), was unheard of for large animals (i.e., tools).

The barn tour also introduced me to a large beef steer, just a few stalls over from Meadow, whose owner admitted him for a gastrointestinal problem. He had no name, which did not surprise me, as he would go to slaughter in a month. Because he had no appetite and, consequently, was losing weight, he was becoming a bad investment for his rancher owner. She brought him to the teaching hospital in hopes that she could see a return on her investment. I asked the student why the animal was there if he was going to go to slaughter anyway. He told me that the steer still had a chance to bring a profit for his owner. The U.S. Department of Agriculture prohibits animals who cannot stand on their own, or downed animals, from going to slaughter. If none of the procedures started to work, then the steer would be euthanized. I asked if they could try other procedures, but I learned that the cost made them prohibitive for an animal who was going to slaughter anyway. The owner could justify the expense only to the point where the money would be returned by the price the steer fetched at market.

These two animal cases revealed much about boundary crossings. Unlike the steer, Meadow illustrated the blurring of the boundaries between large and small animals, or between tools and companions. While she and her neighbor, the steer, belong to the same species, we construct their statuses in completely different ways.

Veterinary training has a classification system that mirrors, but modifies, both taxonomy and the sociozoologic scale. Veterinary education and practice revolve mainly around animals assigned to the good categories. Bad animals usually do not receive veterinary care. Further, although veterinary education focuses on good animals, the subdivisions of companion and tool mean that even these animals have differing social definitions. Although veterinary medicine considers some animals as patients, the distribution of care differs in accordance with the constructed meanings of these subcategories.

**BOUNDARY WORK AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SPECIES IN THE TRACKING SYSTEM**

Veterinary medical education in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom often uses a tracking system that separates large animal and small animal medicine (Hooper, 1994; Willis et al., 2007). “Tracking” is the term used by the veterinary profession and by the participants in this study to indicate
species specialization. Current societal constructions define most large animals as food and small animals as companions. In the U.S., students take courses such as anatomy, physiology, immunology, pharmacology, and pathology during the first two years of a veterinary medical program. Then, they may declare the small animal or large animal track and receive training specific to those species. This is the most basic application of tracking; some veterinary programs in the U.S. (e.g., the University of California, Davis) use tracks that are even more specific (e.g., food animal and equine; Klosterman et al., 2009). Although this research primarily focuses on an American veterinary college that uses the basic tracking model, tracking exists elsewhere in the world in varying capacities. Programs that use tracks that are more specific could see exaggerated consequences of this boundary work and could be the focus of future research. The track usually influences, but does not determine, the practice a student will ultimately pursue. A license to practice veterinary medicine does not specify whether the holder focused on small or large animals, although most veterinarians do limit their practice to one or the other.

At the particular veterinary college I primarily studied, students choose either the small animal, large animal, or mixed/general track in their third year. The names of these tracks are misnomers, however. The small animal track focuses on generally smaller species, but the more defining characteristic is that most of these species are companion animals. The small animal track mostly focuses on dogs and cats, but exotic companion animals, such as birds, reptiles, pocket pets (e.g., rabbits, hamsters, and guinea pigs), fish, and ferrets, are in the subfield of exotics and zoological medicine. If a student wants to work in exotics or zoological medicine, they may declare the interest, but the official track is small animal.

The large animal track generally focuses on larger species. But here, too, the term is misleading; some dog breeds can be just as large as or larger than sheep or pigs. The more defining characteristic is that most of these species are in production (i.e., they are considered tools used for consumption or by-product, such as sheep’s wool). Species in the large animal track include cattle, horses, sheep, goats, alpacas, llamas, domestic and pet pigs, and wild ruminants. Whereas small animal medical training considers the individual animal as a patient, large animal medical training stresses using a herd health approach. The students I spoke with described herd health as a collective treatment practice. Instead of caring for individual animals, the entire herd constitutes the object of care. For example, a herd health approach might require culling a sick animal to prevent the spread of disease to the rest of the herd.
Although horses are physically large animals, the equine hospital at the veterinary college I primarily studied stands distinct from the agricultural animal hospital. If a student has an interest in equine medicine, they may declare that interest within the official track of large animal. Finally, the mixed or general track allows students to take a variety of small and large animal classes of their choosing. When I describe my conversations with veterinary students, I use the terms “small animal” and “companion animal” interchangeably; the same holds for “large animal” and “production animal.” I do this consciously to stress the drastically different constructions of these animals and to illustrate their socially defined roles. Although I use the term “production animal” as opposed to “animals used in production,” I acknowledge the criticism of reifying these constructed categories. I choose these particular terms to minimize wordiness, to reflect the discourse veterinarians and veterinary students actually use to talk about these animals, and to avoid more politically freighted terms (e.g., agricultural or farm animals) that do not exactly portray the animals’ lived experience.

Although many applaud the tracking system for its efficiency in training students for particular areas of veterinary medicine (Willis et al., 2007), support for tracking is not universal. Critics argue that it might detract from a comprehensive foundation in veterinary medicine (Klosterman et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2009).

**RESEARCH GOALS AND QUESTIONS**

This study examines the role of the tracking system in producing and reproducing boundaries between species, resulting in differential social and moral consequences for animals and people. These boundaries not only distinguish between small animals, or companions, and large animals, or tools, they produce consequences for the valuation of knowledge specific to those animals, for the treatment of those animals, for the collective identity of veterinary students, and for the animals who fall along the marginalized borders of these categories.

In analyzing the construction and consequences of species boundaries, this study contributes to the social scientific literature on human-animal relationships. Much of this scholarship to date focuses on companion animal relationships with humans (see Gardyn, 2001; Irvine, 2004; Vitulli, 2006). Work on human-animal relationships with production animals is increasingly coming to the forefront (see Cassuto, 2007; Ellis, 2013, 2014; Wilkie, 2005). Also, wildlife and animals in captivity are often subjects of research (see Jerolmack, 2008; Philo & Wilbert, 2000;
Wolch & Emel, 1998). However, studies have not yet focused on sites where two or more categories of animals exist. Thus, veterinary medicine provides a unique space in which to witness and analyze these social constructions side by side.

By examining veterinary medical education at the institutional level, I also contribute to scholarship on the sociology of knowledge. The analysis of how veterinary medical education shapes veterinary students’ perceptions and treatment of their animal patients sheds light on whose knowledge is privileged, how, and why. In addition, by examining how an occupational identity can be collectively shared across a profession with subdisciplines (tracks) that are almost antithetical to one another, this study informs sociological questions about occupations and professions. By investigating the ambiguous cases within the tracking system and how veterinary medical education addresses species that do not fit the tracks, I contribute to interdisciplinary research focusing on marginalized positions. Furthermore, throughout this research I have recognized that the boundary work that occurs in veterinary medical education’s tracking systems is largely gendered. Using a gendered lens to examine boundaries contributes to the scholarship on the gendering of occupations and identities. Finally, I extend the contribution of this research beyond human-animal relationships by making connections to other hierarchical social constructions that have consequences for different groups, such as those characterized by race, class, and gender.