

Beyond Animal Charisma: A Sociological Approach to Charismatic Species

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Abstract

Sociologists have been debating the nature of charisma since the discipline's inception. Recent debates in the sociology of charisma concern the role of social interaction and the place of organisations in the generation of charisma. As these debates have developed, the interdisciplinary field of conservation has begun to debate the concept of charismatic species. To date, literature from the conservation sciences has identified those species most likely to be identified as charismatic and those variables most frequently associated with charismatic species. However, little theorising has been done on the causes of charisma in charismatic species. This article uses the case of charismatic species to outline sociological arguments about charisma more generally. This theoretical exercise advances the literature in both sociology and conservation in several ways. For sociologists, the case of charismatic species shows that seemingly competitive models of charisma are in fact complementary. For those interested in the uses of charismatic species for conservation, this article demystifies charismatic species, demonstrating the ways in which they are historically and socially constructed.

Keywords: Charismatic species, Charismatic megafauna, Charisma, Conservation, Sociological theory

INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century, sociologists and other social scientists debated whether charisma was a natural, in-born trait that was distributed unevenly across individuals. Contemporary sociologists have moved past these debates, largely agreeing that charisma is socially constructed. However, this is where agreement ends. Today, sociologists are divided on how charisma is socially constructed. This division has implications for the understanding of leadership and the development of different authority types.

Though charisma is a highly fecund concept, spawning hundreds of research projects in recent years, much of this research can be divided between two competing models of charisma. First, some researchers conceive of charisma as

a process that occurs at the level of interaction between a charismatic figure and an audience (e.g. Turner 2003). Here, charisma is produced in equal parts by the figure and the audience and is generated by the emotional bonds which follow from intense interpersonal experience. In contrast, a second body of scholarship contends that charisma is essentially an organisational product (e.g. Joosse 2017). From this perspective, reputational entrepreneurs produce charisma through the interpretations they circulate amongst the organisation's members. These interpretations allow members of the organisation to make sense of a leader's behaviour through the attribution of charismatic powers.

The first model, which might be called the 'emotional resonance' model of charisma, is comparatively spontaneous and organic. The 'reputational management' model, by contrast, suggests that even highly talented figures require an organisational apparatus to mediate communication to an audience. In this organisational schema, those reputational entrepreneurs who occupy key organisational positions lend credibility and meaning to the figure's performances, doing the initial interpretive work that is necessary to gain an audience's trust and respect.

If the recent sociological literature on charisma has overcome earlier stagnating debates—over whether charisma is innate,

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for example—it has managed to do so only by stepping into a new quagmire. While there is general agreement that charisma is socially constructed, these two models present divergent arguments for how that is the case.

Reading both accounts of charisma invites confusion, as each model suggests seemingly irreconcilable processes, mechanisms, and even definitions of charisma. Little wonder, then, that uses of the charisma concept outside of sociology have been confused and inconsistent. One need only read popular debates over this or that political candidate's charisma to see that sociologists are not the only ones who debate the essence of the concept.

Recent use of the concept in other academic disciplines has been similarly confused. In the field of wildlife conservation, scholars and practitioners have developed the concept of “charismatic megafauna” or “charismatic species” to refer to those animal species—typically large (hence *megafauna*), most often land dwelling—which attract the most attention from the public (e.g. Leader-Williams and Dublin 2000; Ducarme et al. 2013). The charismatic species concept has been helpful to those in the field of conservation as one way of thinking through the relationship between the public and conservation efforts. Like some adjacent concepts (e.g. “flagship species”), charismatic megafauna is not a taxonomic concept. Instead, it allows practitioners to think about the communication of scientific findings and the implementation of policy changes.

However, while researchers generally agree that charismatic species do exist in popular culture—some species seem to draw more attention and enthusiasm than others—there are important debates about the role these species should play in conservation efforts. Should those involved in conservation efforts—scientists, policy makers, zoos—emphasise charismatic creatures in order to attract public support? Or will focus on charismatic creatures draw attention away from the needs of other species and the complex ecological challenges that exist in the spaces between species? Does the fixation on charismatic creatures diminish the public's ability to comprehend the complexity of ecological issues involved in good conservation science and policy?

All of these questions are essentially about the nature of charisma itself. Where does it come from and what is it? Is it something irrational, born out of ignorance (and therefore perhaps poorly suited as a conservation tool)? Or is it a powerful and meaningful form of attachment? To date, research on charismatic megafauna has been descriptive, involving polls and surveys in which respondents are asked to list or select charismatic animals (e.g. Barney et al. 2005; Albert et al. 2018). This literature is useful for identifying charismatic species but does not suggest why certain species are charismatic (offering instead collections of variables, like size, which seem positively correlated with charisma).

The two primary sociological models of charisma may help demystify the concept of charismatic species. Each presents a unique account of how humans socially construct charismatic relationships with nonhuman species. The emotional resonance model suggests that charismatic species are the result of highly

charged interactions, while the reputational management model suggests that certain species become charismatic because of the work of reputational entrepreneurs. The specific mechanisms identified by each model—why some interactions are more emotionally powerful and how those emotions are translated into charisma; who is doing the reputation management for nonhuman species and the frameworks they use to generate and sustain charismatic associations—are further elaborated below.

At the same time, the case of charismatic species provides a useful test for these competing models. Much of the early literature on charisma was preoccupied with the internal qualities of the charismatic figure. While contemporary scholarship has pivoted toward social constructionist models of charisma, the temptation of the charismatic fallacy (that charisma is an innate quality which can be universally recognised) is ever present. Even highly theoretical social constructionist accounts of charisma pause to dwell on the enigmatic qualities of a particular charismatic figure. The notion of charismatic species, in which charisma lies not in a mysterious and intriguing individual but in the relationship that emerges between an entire species and human observers, inoculates against this temptation.

The case of charismatic species promises useful interdisciplinary exchange. The field of conservation may benefit from sociological insights into the processes of charisma construction, while the field of sociology gains a useful case to test competing propositions. As an initial inquiry, this article focuses on theoretical elaboration in order to identify and name key processes and offer a preliminary assessment of the claims made by competing sociological models of charisma.

This theoretical elaboration proceeds following a literature review of charisma in both sociology and the interdisciplinary work on charismatic species. The final sections of this article argue that while the two primary sociological models of charisma seem opposed, the case of charismatic species suggests that they are in fact complementary. As this case shows, the emotional resonance and reputational management models of charisma operate simultaneously but at different points of mediation. The charisma of charismatic species is a historical social construction: it involves reputational entrepreneurs engaged in culture work—discovery, dissemination, interpretation—which build interpretive frameworks. The extent to which these frameworks interact with audiences to achieve states of emotional intensity and clarity determines the extent to which a species is understood as charismatic.

This article demonstrates that the social construction of charisma involves both emotional and interactive elements as well as mediated, organisational processes. It reinforces the sociological position that charisma is socially constructed, rather than an innate quality, and that the creation of charisma is an ongoing process rather than a permanent creation. At the same time, the article offers a useful lesson for those working at the intersection of public policy and conservation science: the charisma of charismatic megafauna is not innate but requires both emotional connection and reputation management on the part of reputational entrepreneurs. However, to demonstrate the

usefulness of these contributions, it is necessary to begin with the literature on charisma in both sociology and conservation.

CHARISMA: THE SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Max Weber's work on charisma has inspired countless studies, but it has also inspired a great deal of confusion. In his writings on political authority, Weber suggested that charisma, "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities," was opposed to traditional and legal authority by its dynamism (Weber 1968: 48).

Subsequent scholars have found Weber's foundational work elliptical: just where does that "certain quality of individual personality" that Weber identified come from? Sociologists who considered this question developed a somewhat tautological answer: that charismatic personalities originate in those personalities that seem most charismatic. Camic (1980), for example, supplemented Weber's work with Freud, suggesting that charisma arises from certain libidinal and aggressive needs. Miyahara (1983), by contrast, locates charisma as a response to alienation.

On the one hand, the mid- to late-twentieth century work on charisma suggests dissensus: as scholars turned to personality and the inner qualities of charisma, disputes over the concept only grew. However, across the sociological work from this period is a consensus that is easily overlooked: that while the essence of charisma is disputed, it is fundamentally a relational property. In other words, charisma only becomes meaningful between people, rather than within them. As Thomas E. Dow, Jr., put it in 1969: "There is no single charismatic temperament or personality type... Basically, it involves a distinct social relationship..." (1969: 315).

Subsequent scholarship has overcome debates concerning the essence of charisma by focusing on the process through which charismatic social relationships arise. This contemporary scholarship, though diverse, has tended to focus either on unmediated relationships between a figure (who will eventually be charismatic) and an audience (who will eventually be charismatic followers) or an organisational approach. In both cases, charisma emerges through a process of social construction.

The turn to emotion may seem to imply further speculation on the interior qualities of charisma. However, theories of emotional resonance have focused almost exclusively on social interaction. For example, Wasielewski's analysis of charisma and emotion contended that charisma emerges when a performer provides an emotional display through speech, action, or gesture (1985). When witnesses take this performance as a "shared emotional frame" (in other words, when witnesses see in this display a more clearly articulated and formalised version of their own inchoate emotions), they come to see the performer as charismatic. Here, charisma essentially arises when the meanings offered by a social actor articulate the experiences of an audience.

This emotional resonance model of charisma construction suggests that the process is spontaneous and serendipitous. A figure is made charismatic when their performance coincides with the presence of a receptive audience. However, certain structural conditions, namely the collapse of existing traditional or rationalised meaning systems, are more conducive to charisma construction.

A central debate in the charisma literature, largely absent in the emotional resonance model, is the extent to which charisma has any institutional or organisational form (e.g. Shils 1965). In his 2017 account of a nascent spiritual leader, Joesse observes that the leader's start was marked by a lack of confidence and conviction. At these initial stages of the spiritual leader's journey, a small group of loyalists proved necessary. In Joesse's account, "...the charismatic leader here became worthy of an exalted status... because such statuses were at times thrust upon him in a manner that caused them to 'stick'." (2017: 349) Joesse names this group of acolytes, whose support creates the foundation for further success and wider appeal, the "charismatic aristocracy".

While Joesse's name for these loyal intermediaries is somewhat misleading—at least in the case he analyses, these actors possess neither the stability nor the authority of an aristocracy—his analysis does capture an alternative model for the social construction of charisma. Here, the catalyst for charisma is not emotional resonance, but an organisational apparatus that can mediate between a figure and a wider audience, offering reassurance and plausibility to the figure and the audience during moments of uncertainty.

This brief review of a vast literature suggests both development and division. Sociologists have largely moved past views of charisma as an in-born personality type. Instead, charisma is today conceived of in terms which might broadly be called interactionist. In this view, charisma is a phenomenon of social interaction. This is why an individual can be seen as intensely charismatic in one setting but wholly uncharismatic in another. Yet in advancing between the 'innate' model of charisma, contemporary sociology is divided. Some sociologists take a pure interactionist approach and conceive of charisma as 'emotional resonance', in which performances become charismatic to the extent that they resonate or clarify the audience's emotional state. Others take a more institutional approach, suggesting that key actors, who I'll call reputational entrepreneurs, acts as intermediaries between an audience and an actor, offering interpretations which lend plausibility to the performance.

The dramatic change in how sociologists approach charisma becomes more apparent if one turns to other fields. As the following review suggests, conservation science or conservation biology has recently begun to consider charisma as a potentially important variable in wildlife conservation policy. However, the conceptualisation of charisma in this literature tends to approach the concept as an innate property: some species are just naturally more charismatic than others. The following section concludes a review of the conservation literature on charisma with observations on the shortcomings of the field's conceptualisation.

CONSERVATION AND CHARISMA

Conservation science or conservation biology is a broad, interdisciplinary field which features contributions from ecology, biology, and social policy. Less a discipline than a field of inquiry, conservation science is oriented toward understanding threats to biodiversity and developing appropriate remedies to those threats. Discussions of charisma within this literature began in the 1980s and 1990s and were then associated with the adjacent concept of “flagship species” (Leader-Williams and Dublin 2000). In this early literature, flagship species were conceived of as iconic symbols of particular or general ecological threats, selected by conservation advocates on the basis of their charisma.

From these early discussions, the concept of charisma proliferated in conservation research. Today, researchers are investigating the role of charisma in species invasion, the extent to which species charisma drives local eco-tourism, and the relationship between species charisma and species extinction. Thus, one finds that species charisma both encourages local eco-tourism projects and is irrelevant to local eco-tourism projects (e.g. Lindsey et al. 2007; Maciejewski and Kerley 2014; Hausmann et al. 2017). Similarly, one finds that species charisma is correlated with both robust population health and an increased likelihood of extinction (e.g. Brambilla et al. 2013; Colléony et al. 2016; Courchamp et al. 2018). Confronted with these empirical debates in the literature, an obvious question emerges: how does conservation science define the charisma of charismatic species?

The earliest references to species charisma invoke the concept in passing; in these instances, charisma is defined almost tautologically as those species which attract enough attention or affection that they are good candidates for “flagship” status. Naturally, researchers interested in using charismatic species in conservation policy sought greater clarification. Just what is a charismatic species?

The conservation science literature has tended to answer this question ideographically. For example, Albert et al. performed large surveys and reviewed popular media in order to identify “The twenty most charismatic species” (2018). Others have attempted to identify charismatic species using surveys, experiments, and data from internet search engines. This literature has found that charismatic species tend to be comparatively larger (‘charismatic megafauna’), are more likely to be carnivorous, bear a relatively greater resemblance to humans, have comparatively wider distribution, and are, at least in some researchers’ eyes, “more attractive” (e.g. Gunthorsdottir 2001; Root-Bernstein et al. 2013; Monsarrat and Kerley 2018; Ducatez 2019; Berti et al. 2020; Jarić et al. 2020; Stoudt et al. 2022).

The literature from conservation science, which has originated from research conducted across disciplines, has identified the most charismatic species and also identified those variables most strongly correlated with species charisma. Yet, as Ducarme et al. observed in their 2013 article, despite a rich literature describing which species are

charismatic, the concept of charisma or charismatic species itself remains ambiguous.

While the conservation literature on charismatic species has been mostly descriptive, sometimes taxonomic, and always oriented toward the pragmatic dimensions of wildlife management, a few influential articles have offered a more theoretical approach to the topic. Lorimer’s 2007 article on “Nonhuman Charisma” has been much cited for its theoretical qualities. Though the concept of “nonhuman” charisma suggests wide application, Lorimer’s article is focused on constructing a typology out of cases from the animal world.

Relying largely on ethnographic research, Lorimer’s theory describes three types of nonhuman charisma: ecological, corporeal, and aesthetic. At least two of these categories replicate the observations made in the conservation literature. Thus, ecological nonhuman charisma is a type of charisma largely dependent on an animal’s perceptibility to humans. Certain features—size, colour, shape, and location in time and space, for example—make an animal more perceptible, and therefore more likely to possess ecological charisma. Aesthetic charisma “relates to the aesthetic properties of an organism’s appearance and behaviour when encountered visually” (2007: 918). Lorimer emphasises that the degree and type of aesthetic charisma that an animal possesses may be related to the degree to which their physical appearance lies within what he calls “anthropocentric norms” (2007: 920).

Both aesthetic and ecological nonhuman charisma are plausible concepts which are thoughtfully constructed from ethnographic observations. Neither concept, though, amounts to a theoretical explanation of charisma. Indeed, despite the postmodern stylings of the article, both aesthetic and ecological nonhuman charisma appear very close to nineteenth century social scientific conceptions of charisma. In all of these instances, charisma is an innate property. Some animals, like some people, are simply more charismatic.

Lorimer’s third type of nonhuman charisma, corporeal charisma, comes closest to offering a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon. As with all three types described in the article, corporeal charisma is deceptively named. Though the name suggests a charisma which emanates from an animal’s body, it in fact refers to “affections and emotions” that are awakened in humans who have sustained interaction with wild animals.

Lorimer identifies small population of humans who have prolonged exposure to wild animals (he draws on the case of amateur ornithologists, but one could expand this to include all amateur or professional wildlife experts). This exposure produces both expertise and empathy such that the human can observe wildlife knowingly and experience intense emotional states. From this, one could deduce several theoretical propositions: (1) contact with wild animals produces emotional reactions in humans, (2) greater knowledge of wildlife will create greater empathy for wildlife, (3) greater empathy for wildlife will produce more intense emotional reactions, and (4) based on propositions 2 and 3, amateur and professional wildlife experts will have the most intense emotional reactions to wildlife (the emotional states found in wildlife professionals

will produce life-altering states which we can call corporeal charisma).

Because Lorimer's account of corporeal charisma does not rest on the innate and interior qualities of animals themselves, but rather on human experience, it is more easily transformed into a theoretical argument. However, when articulated as a set of theoretical propositions, corporeal charisma seems to overcompensate for the qualities of the article's other conceptions of charisma. Specifically, corporeal charisma is here described as a human reaction to external stimuli. Whereas Lorimer's aesthetic and ecological charisma locate their object within animals, corporeal charisma is described in terms of interior human experience (e.g. it can take the form of "epiphany" and "jouissance").

Much like the nineteenth-century social scientists who studied charisma, Lorimer treats his concepts as numinous essences. Charisma is here described, in all its variations, as a special property. Yet, further theoretical elaboration collapses the analysis into tautology: charisma is a special property or experience, and certain animals and humans possess charisma because of their specialness.

Read on its own terms, Lorimer's account of nonhuman charisma offers moving descriptions of experiences in which humans found themselves in close encounters with wild animals. Lorimer's analysis also replicates much of the empirical social science literature from conservation science. Both Lorimer and the conservation science literature find that large, human-like animals are more likely to be charismatic (though Lorimer adds that there is a sort of "negative" charisma found in creatures that possess the opposite qualities). Both Lorimer and the conservation science literature also succumb to a tempting tautology: that animals which are [large, human-like, etc.] are charismatic, and they are charismatic because they are [large, human-like, etc.]. Put another way, all of this literature defines charisma with a set of traits and then explains charisma using those same traits.

The problem with this approach is that it cannot explain important variations between species. Why is the relationship between size and charisma nonlinear (opinion surveys suggest that the biggest animals on earth, whales, are not the most charismatic, and some small animals, like koalas and penguins, are identified as more charismatic than their size would suggest)? If "anthropocentric beauty standards" determine charisma, why are the species most closely related to humans (the great apes) less charismatic than big cats? Why do opinions on species charisma change across time and space? If charisma is a property which emerges from species morphology, why is the distribution of species charisma not morphologically clustered (in other words, why don't all big cats or all great apes rank similarly in ordinal surveys of charismatic species)?

One can acknowledge, with the existing literature, that certain "taxonomic biases" exist (Clark and May 2002). That is, if charisma emerges in a relationship, then a preceding condition of that relationship is recognition, and that certain species are more likely to be recognised than others. This is particularly true if one reflects on the long history of charismatic

species; in periods before high-definition photography, before mass media, and before the internet, for example, unmediated visibility and recognition were intertwined.

Yet even if certain innate qualities mean that some species (for example, large, terrestrial mammals) are more likely to be recognised by humans than others, one must admit that human attention is a seemingly limited resource, and that even for this "highly recognizable" group of species there is within-group variation of charismatic attribution (not all large, terrestrial mammals are equally, or even similarly, charismatic). Secondly, the proliferation of technologies which capture high-definition images of microscopic life, paired with the global penetration of media networks which can distribute these images, means that those features which have seemed obviously necessary for species charisma in the past may be less so today (and even less so in the future). The size of an animal becomes relative when most of the animals you encounter are on a screen.

But challenges to the existing literature on charismatic species do not emerge solely from a changing media landscape or from within-group variation of charisma for large terrestrial mammals. In their 2014 editorial, Ginn, Beisel, and Barua described the interesting case of captive giant isopods at Japan's Toba Aquarium. According to the authors, a 29-centimeter-long specimen was a "star attraction", its "alien appearance" inspiring "fascination, fear, and disgust". The isopod stood out in an aquarium with species much more aligned with typical models of nonhuman charisma (walrus, otters, dugongs, etc.) (Ginn et al. 2014).

How do we account for this localised case of an emergent charismatic species that seems to defy the existing literature? One could travel further down the passages of essentialism: perhaps 'charisma' is merely the name we give to those species which awaken our deepest evolutionary instincts (possibly driven by an innate "biophilia" or "biophobia", see Kellert and Wilson 1993). Yet a doubled-down essentialism cannot account for economies of attention (why, for example, the predator across the world may seem more magnetic than the predator in our backyard), nor for extensive mediation in the modern world (for example that millions of global consumers will encounter megafauna on screens and not in contexts likely to awaken instinctive associations), nor for differences in charismatic attribution for morphologically or ecologically similar species (e.g. bonobos and chimpanzees).

Accounting for these variations would require the integration of sociological perspectives into the study of charismatic species. Such an approach has begun to emerge. In their 2017 article, Krause and Robinson approach the topic of charismatic species using cultural and organisational sociology. This approach is groundbreaking insofar as it emphasises how concepts in conservation science like "charismatic species" are socially constructed through individual and organisational meaning-making. This is a novel intervention insofar as it moves analysis away from charisma as an innate property (an intense emotion, a product of physical characteristics) and toward processes of social interaction in which a range

of actors negotiate meanings and priorities. Yet while Krause and Robinson's work offers a powerful intervention, the authors were not focused on explaining charisma as such, but rather in using the case of charismatic species to explain cultural schemas in conservation organisations. Given this, there remains an urgent need for a sociological model of charismatic species.

THE NEW SOCIOLOGY OF CHARISMA AND CONSERVATION

We have, then, two literatures, each seemingly at an impasse. On the one hand, while the sociology of charisma appears divided against itself, with some sociologists pursuing an 'emotional resonance' model of charisma and others pursuing a 'reputational management' approach. On the other hand, conservation science has developed the concept of charismatic species, and has implemented that concept into conservation policy, even as the nature of that concept remains somewhat mysterious, known primarily through its covariates.

The emotional resonance model of charisma found in sociology seems to articulate many of the concerns over charismatic species found in the conservation literature. This literature argues that some species simply hold more emotional or cultural sway over humans than others, and that the coincidence of certain variables (size, diet, range, behaviour, etc.) is strongly associated with charisma.

The emotional resonance model would argue that that the powerful emotional or cultural connection to a charismatic species is the result of an interaction between an audience (in this case some group or groups of humans) and a performer (in this case an animal species). The theatrical metaphor employed by this model ("audience" and "performer") is clear enough when applied to human social life. For example, campaigning politicians perform before voters much like an actor performs before an audience.

But the theatrical metaphor needs to be clarified in the case of charismatic species. Who is the "performer" in the case of charismatic species? In this case, a species is the performer, but the nature of that species will vary depending on the interaction. Sometimes, the emotional resonance of charisma will arise in face-to-face, unmediated interactions. In this case, the role of species is performed by an individual or small group, which is taken as in some sense representative of the species. At other times (in fact, most times), the species will be an abstraction, an image, video, or even idea of a species circulating amongst some population of humans engaged in interpretation. This means that the nature of the performance will vary, from a closely observed action in the wild to an iconic scene from a movie to an image in a person's mind.

Not only is the nature of the "performer" more general in the case of charismatic species, so too is the audience. In this case, the audience is some group or groups of humans reflecting, either through direct contact or some form of mediation, on an animal species. Two points of clarification need to be made regarding the audience in these charisma-generating

interactions. First, the audience in this interaction is not a stable or discrete population of humans. Different groups will be engaged in an interpretive interaction with the species at different points in its 'charismatic career' (to coin a phrase). These interpretive groups will vary in size, from local groups interpreting the species through proximate relationships, to larger populations of humans at the national or international level whose interactions with the species are highly mediated and abstract.

It is also important to emphasise that this human audience is reflecting; they are not passive viewers, but individuals who engage in active interpretation. This act of interpretation is necessary to produce charisma: only when an audience finds a 'performance' powerful and plausible can we say that charisma has been successfully generated.

If one thinks of the creation of emotional resonance in terms of a charismatic career, rather than a discrete event, several implications follow. First, the social construction of charisma through emotional resonance is not necessarily a synchronous process. Because different audiences will be interpreting different styles of performance (direct, indirect, unmediated, highly mediated, etc.) at different times and in different places, interpretations may vary. This means that the charismatic career of a species will not necessarily follow a cumulative path.

Here, it might be illuminating to consider accounts of meaning-making offered by those working to establish a 'posthuman' turn in the social sciences and humanities. In his work on nonhuman commodities, for example, Barua widens our field of vision beyond single points of production or extraction, so that value comes to be understood as a complex assemblage of packaging and circulation by a variety of human and nonhuman actors (Barua 2016, 2019).

While it might be tempting to view the successive 'performances' of a species as always generative (each performance adding to the charismatic stock of the species), there may be instances in which resonance is not achieved and charisma is not generated. Indeed, audiences may generate competing interpretive frameworks. For example, Annu Jalais's 2008 study of tigers demonstrates a division between "cosmopolitan" and "colonial" interpretive schemas, with the cosmopolitan framing, which circulates amongst middle class urbanites, dominating the conservation agenda (Jalais 2008). Audiences generate different interpretations based on social position, and the charismatic career of a species may be marked by conflicting interpretive accounts.

To summarise: the emotional resonance model of charisma must be recast for the case of charismatic species. Both performer and audience vary in levels of abstraction and degrees of mediation, while the performance is not a single event, nor even a cumulative sequence of events, but a complex assemblage of interpretations.

But the central metaphor of the emotional resonance model of charismatic species has an obvious problem. Most people today do not interact with wildlife regularly, and those species which are often identified as most charismatic are also the ones with which people tend to interact the least. The question

remains: how do wild animals ‘resonate’ with human audiences who never observe them in the wild?

Here, the ‘reputational management’ model of charisma emerges as a complementary, rather than competing, model for charismatic species. In the reputational management model, important individuals circulate interpretive frameworks which render a charismatic figure plausible or otherwise legitimate. In the case of charismatic species, these reputational entrepreneurs can be found at key points of mediation: creating scientific knowledge, popularising scientific knowledge, and creating cultural archetypes through artistic or other creative endeavours. Simply put, reputational entrepreneurs create and circulate a variety of forms of knowledge about a species.

At this point, one can begin to construct a more sociological model of charismatic species. Charismatic species is a concept which describes the uneven distribution of emotional energy and attention which humans give to animals. Those animals which inspire significant emotional energy and attention can be called ‘charismatic species’. The emotional energy which defines a charismatic species is produced in interactions between an audience (some group of humans) and a performer (the species). The ‘resonance’ experienced here arises when a performance aligns with background knowledge (the nature of this background knowledge may vary; it may involve personal experience, e.g., “Species X is like me”, or a broader cultural scenario “Species X captures our national spirit”).

What does ‘resonance’ look like? Here, literature from the burgeoning field of animal studies may prove instructive. For example, some species may analogise human social relations. A species depicted or perceived as dangerous may effectively analogise racial anxieties and hierarchies (McHugh 2011; Boisseron 2018). A species depicted or perceived as quietly powerful may analogise national sentiments about security, militarisation, and conquest (Sax 2008: 74–75). Here, resonance is generated by a sort of emotional clarity. Alternatively, Burt has written of the “rupturing” effect that animals (or their depictions) can have on an audience, blurring or dissolving boundaries (casting light on the permeable boundary between “nature” and “civilization”, for example) (Burt 2002). From this perspective, resonance is a sort of intense emotional confusion which heightens the audience’s sense of uncertainty.

In either case, these examples suggest that the nature of modern human life means that most interactions between humans and wildlife will be mediated, indirect, or otherwise abstract. Given this, reputational entrepreneurs play an important part in the interaction between a species of wildlife and a human audience. At key junctures—discovery, popularisation, transformation into cultural archetypes—experts (i.e. people who have created a specialised, interpretive account of the species) will create and circulate knowledge which will allow the nonexpert human population to develop more meaningful interpretations of a species. Without the presence of reputational entrepreneurs, audiences will simply

lack the knowledge to experience emotional resonance during a ‘performance’. This will be true even if a species is marked by variables (size, range, etc.) which are strongly correlated with charisma.

This sociological model of charismatic species has several implications, the most important of which will be outlined here. First, charismatic species are historical. There is no ‘state of nature’ when it comes to charismatic species, no moment of pre-historical contact from which charisma flows. Rather, charismatic species are built out of years of reputational management through scientific research, the popularisation of scientific knowledge, and artistic interpretation. Individuals like wildlife biologists surely have intense emotional experiences during face-to-face encounters with wildlife. But these experiences are biographical. ‘Charisma’, by contrast, is a social quality which must be developed over time.

Second, and following from the first implication, charismatic species are socially constructed. This is not to say that the quality ‘charisma’ which marks charismatic species is purely arbitrary, fictitious, or wholly malleable. Rather, charismatic species are the products of real human labour. This labour occurs at two ends. First, there is the social production of charismatic species on the part of reputational entrepreneurs. This involves a host of activities from discovery to creativity, marketing, and promotion. The activities of reputational entrepreneurs may be more or less self-conscious (a reputational entrepreneur might be trying to cultivate charisma on behalf of a species, or might be pursuing alternative ends, from scientific knowledge to enjoyment).

Second, there is the social interpretation of charismatic species on the part of an audience. Both of these processes of social construction are necessary for the creation of charismatic species. Significantly, while these processes should be thought of in terms of real human labour, they needn’t be self-conscious or calculated (in other words, the social construction of species charisma across time does not require individual human actors be conscious of their interpretive labour).

Taken as a whole, this model suggests that charisma is neither as innate nor as numinous as existing literature on charismatic species suggests. Rather, charisma is the result of accumulated cultural labour. From this vantage point, the ‘special properties’ which radiate from charismatic species become altogether less mysterious. The policy implications of this more sociological approach are clear: if conservationists ‘build it’ (that is, create meaningful interpretive frameworks around a species) then ‘they’ (a public who attributes charisma) will come. That the social construction of charisma is complex, subject to disparate acts of interpretation by widely diverse audiences who may undermine or subvert entrepreneurial efforts, should only encourage further research to better understand the mechanisms which most reliably generate charismatic species. To demonstrate the lessons and value of this sociological approach, a brief discussion of two divergent cases of charismatic species follows.

HONEY BADGERS AND FAT GRIZZLIES: HOW REPUTATIONAL ENTREPRENEURS ALIGN WITH AUDIENCES TO GENERATE EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

The honey badger (*Mellivora capensis*) and the North American brown bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), or grizzly bear, are different in just about every observable way. Though they share broad similarities—terrestrial mammals, omnivorous, purported by humans to be distinctly aggressive—their range, size, and conservation status mean that the two are unlikely to be discussed together in the charismatic species literature. Indeed, in their 2018 comprehensive study of charismatic species, Albert et al. found that brown bears made the “Twenty Most Charismatic Species” list, while honey badgers were never in contention.

But the sociological approach to charismatic species outlined above retrains the eye. To begin, charisma in this model is not stable or permanent. Because charismatic species are the result of culture work on the part of reputational entrepreneurs and interpreting audiences, charisma can accumulate or fade depending on the efforts of the former and receptivity of the latter. Thus, rankings of charismatic species should change over time.

The honey badger demonstrates this point vividly. Data from the internet search engine Google suggests that the honey badger’s charisma (approximated here by the enthusiasm of internet users) was, for much of the first decade of the twentieth century, non-existent.¹

But between late 2011 and early 2012, the charisma of the honey badger suddenly surged. This is demonstrated not only in internet search activity, but also in the sudden proliferation of honey badger paraphernalia (children’s books, apparel, posters, coffee mugs, etc.). What happened? Had the honey badger experienced a sudden, unprecedented evolutionary shift which increased its innate charisma?

Of course, the growth in the honey badger’s charisma was not biological or ecological but social and very much of its time. In early 2011, a pseudonymous user of the website YouTube uploaded an edited montage of video clips featuring honey badgers. The video, titled “The Crazy Nastyass Honey Badger”, featured a sarcastic and exaggerated comedic voiceover narration set to documentary footage (czg123 2011). The narrator of the video describes the honey badger as “crazy”, an animal that “doesn’t care” about the dangers of its environment. The video gradually achieved viral fame, spreading across the internet, eventually obtaining over 100 million views, and eventually congealing into a meme centred on the phrase “Honey badger don’t care”.

The leap in interest surrounding the honey badger demonstrates the social construction of charisma in action. At one end of this process is an interpreting audience who experiences a deep emotional resonance with the honey badger’s performance. This is most acutely demonstrated in the popularity of the “Honey badger don’t care” phrase, plastered across internet message boards and consumer goods

like t-shirts and novelty books. For this audience, the honey badger and its associated meme crystallised a then-unnamed emotional state: a bold, even fool-hardy disregard for danger.

But this sudden surge in charisma was not generated merely by a receptive audience. Instead, a longer history of cultural labour created interpretive schemas which then coincided with a receptive audience. This labour involved decades of scientific research, early efforts at popularisation by artists, and eventually the humorous satirical efforts of an online creator (e.g. Ruark 1965; Kruuk and Mills 1983). The sociological construction of charismatic species is then a historical process, the work of which is often invisible in the final product, and certainly not reducible to those variables (size, resemblance to humans, etc.) which are most frequently discussed in the literature.

But the achievement of charisma is never permanent. This is obvious in the case of the honey badger; Google search data indicates that in the wake of 2011–2012 virality, interest in the species has declined, though not to pre-internet virality lows. The fragility of species charisma is also demonstrated, though, in those animals whose charisma appears most obvious to researchers.

A clear example of this is offered in the case of an annual event known as “Fat Bear Week”. A cursory reading of this event would suggest that it is a clear demonstration of the power of an innately charismatic species to generate interest. Every year since 2015, the website explore.org works with Katmai National Park in Alaska to host a public contest to name a “Fat Bear Champion”. In essence, the competition invites people to watch live-streamed videos on Katmai’s grizzly bear population and then vote for a preferred “champion” from a pre-selected pool of “candidates”. Viewers are invited to tune-in to live video streams in the autumn months, when grizzlies can be found feeding on anadromous salmon, a period in which, it happens, bears build significant fat stores in anticipation of winter hibernation. The contest has proved popular with the public: in 2022, over one million votes were counted. The event is advertised as a means of raising public awareness about brown bears, conservation issues, and the national park (Tumin 2022).

Existing approaches to charismatic species would suggest that the grizzly bear was selected because of its charisma. There is some evidence to support this position: the former park ranger who founded the event was inspired by existing public interest in Katmai National Park’s live video streams of its grizzly population. However, this would overlook the historically significant work of reputational entrepreneurs. To start, the presence of “bear cameras” depended upon pre-existing entrepreneurial activity on the part of researchers, public scientists, artists, and an inestimable collection of actors who studied and interpreted these animals. More pointedly, though, it was not until the event’s founders developed a contest which was wholly focused on the “fatness” of the bears that public enthusiasm escalated. For whatever reason, whether humour or pride or sympathy, that specific framing resonated with audiences (to see the importance of entrepreneurial management here, imagine if the organisers of the competition

had framed their contest as an event dedicated to voting for the “Best Fisherman” or “Bear Who is Most Prepared for Winter”, rather than the simple, attention-getting “Fat Bear Week”).

This case demonstrates an important lesson offered by the sociological model of charismatic species. Charisma must be continually managed to be maintained and directed toward useful conservation outcomes. From this perspective, attention is a commodity, and this may be especially true of wild animals, whom contemporary humans are unlikely to encounter or consider in their daily lives. Even those species whose charisma seems assured need reputational entrepreneurs to develop compelling interpretive schemas which will resonate with audiences.

Does this suggest a sort of entrepreneurial determinism? In other words, are conscious, knowledgeable, and diligent reputational entrepreneurs the ultimate arbiters of species charisma?

To answer this question, one might begin by considering the formation of reputational entrepreneurs themselves. What inspires these key cultural actors to undertake their work? While further research is needed to answer this question, Lorimer’s work on wildlife specialists shows that at least some reputational entrepreneurs pursue their work as a consequence of profound, direct interactions with wildlife. This means that animals themselves may play some catalysing role in the social construction of charisma.

Not only are reputational entrepreneurs products of their environments (and all of the ‘more than human’ interactions those environments hold), their entrepreneurial work takes a range of forms and is motivated by an equally diverse array of impulses. One important lesson imparted from the cases of the honey badger and the bears of Katmai is that reputational entrepreneurs are not always consciously pursuing a project of conservation. The creator of the viral honey badger video does not seem to have had any special concern for the subject of his video; instead, the honey badger was a vehicle for humour. In contrast, the managers of “Fat Bear Week” used a humorous framing to advance conservation. While both cases demonstrate the power of reputational entrepreneurs, they also suggest that this class of actors is diverse and varied in its motivations.

Finally, the viral honey badger video and the success of “Fat Bear Week” suggest that some degree of coincidence (the presentation of a species aligning with other salient aspects of culture) is present in the construction of charisma. This observation should reinforce charismatic species as social constructions (after all, even a species like the honey badger, which seems to possess several qualities identified in the literature as in some sense essentially charismatic, existed in relative obscurity), but should discourage observers from seeing species charisma as always the product of deliberate and calculated actions by individuals pursuing conservation agendas.

CONCLUSION

At a fundamental level, charismatic species offer a vivid illustration of what contemporary sociologists already know:

charisma is not an innate essence that naturally and inevitably flows from a charismatic figure to a passive audience. The conservation literature has identified traits which tend to correlate with charisma, but none of these variables express a consistent, linear relationship with charisma. The largest species on earth are ‘outranked’ in survey data by terrestrial predators and plenty of smaller species, penguins for example, tend to waddle up the rankings despite their relatively diminutive stature.

But charismatic species also present a challenge to sociologists. Charismatic species are cases of ‘abstract charisma’. Though most people will never come face-to-face with a brown bear, let alone a wild brown bear, the species is dependably identified as charismatic by surveyed publics. Most studies of charisma in sociology focus on consistent, face-to-face interaction. This is true of both contemporary tendencies in the literature, called here the ‘reputational management’ and ‘emotional resonance’ models. In charismatic species, by contrast, we find a type of charisma which holds in the audience’s mind as an abstraction, absent the immediate presence of the charismatic figure.

Working through this theoretical challenge, this article has argued that charismatic species are socially constructed through a process which involves both reputational management and emotional resonance. In short, reputational entrepreneurs develop and disseminate interpretive frameworks of a species. These frameworks will resonate with an actively interpreting audience if they provide some form of emotional intensity and clarity, at which point the species can be meaningfully understood as charismatic.

This perspective brings several theoretical advantages. First, it overcomes the tendency to view charisma as an innate property, a tendency which cannot account for changing degrees of charisma over time or those cases (i.e. small charismatic species) which defy expectation. Instead, this sociological approach to charismatic species encourages thinking about charisma as a historical process, in which charisma waxes and wanes over time in correlation with real human cultural labour, which includes discovery, creativity, marketing, promotion, and, ultimately, interpretation by some human audience.

If charismatic species teach sociology that its existing models of charisma can be complementary, the sociological approach outlined here also has lessons to teach conservation. Specifically, the historical and social perspective suggests that those working in conservation have a greater control over which species become charismatic than they often suppose. Rather than treating charisma as a natural property which can be used by conservation, conservationists should approach charisma as a property which they can help stimulate.

But, like any cultural product, species charisma is a volatile object. Indeed, the fact that charismatic species are not generated through a single interaction (as may be the case in some instances of human charisma), but across a charismatic career which plays out before different audiences with varying levels of mediation, suggests that the social construction of

charismatic species may be more volatile than other forms of charisma. The charismatic career of a species may involve the proliferation of any number of interpretive frameworks, many of which may be in conflict with one another. Additionally, a degree of randomness will be at work in the emergence of resonance, so that reputational entrepreneurs must be ever-alert if they are to help advance the charismatic career of a species.

Much work remains to be done if this sociological approach to charismatic species is to be developed and made more useful for conservation. First, the potential interpretive audiences which reputational entrepreneurs might target is inestimable. Further research might specify the variety of human audiences whose interpretations generate species charisma, and further specify which of these audiences is most important in the generation of charismatic species (this might be those transnational audiences most likely to fund conservation efforts through voluntary donations; alternatively, it might be more localised audiences who live alongside the species in question). Further, future research should take up comparative analysis of the culture work that goes into creating charismatic species in order to assess the mechanisms whereby some interpretive frames resonate more than others. While a high degree of randomness may be involved in the social construction of charismatic species, the identification of non-random mechanisms would mark a significant development in the understanding of charismatic species. Species whose charisma defies expectation (the small, the ugly, the markedly nonhuman) will prove particularly useful in these efforts.

If the general lesson of conservation science is that humans have a greater role in the environment than we as individuals are ever conscious of, the sociological approach to charismatic species reasserts this lesson. Going forward, those who seek to use charisma in conservation should begin not with the mysterious properties which radiate from animals, but with the all too human work that goes into shaping reputation and understanding.

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Not applicable.

NOTE

- 1 This data can be found using the publicly accessible Google Trends tool at: trends.google.com. While internet search activity should not be used as the sole measure of charisma, it can be a useful means of documenting sudden growths in interest, particularly when coupled with a sudden commercialism (as occurred in the case of honey badgers discussed above).

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