What's in a Face?
The Social Character of the English Bulldog

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ABSTRACT: The English Bulldog is introduced as a cultural product through ethnographic description. Its peculiar physiology relates to its social meanings and three categories of the dog are discerned: show dogs, celebrities, and pets. Each type of dog embodies a selective character, which is depicted and then analyzed in terms of ambiguous semantic categories. As a cultural product, the Bulldog is a living symbol of ambiguous relationships between society and nature. In the context of everyday life, it provides an occasion for understanding these relationships.

Because of a lack of interest in animals as part of social context or perhaps failure to see them as part of that context, there are only a few sociological studies of animals (Ball, 1971; Hickrod and Schmitt, 1983). Anthropologists, however, study relationships between humans and animals to uncover fundamental meanings of cultural life (Leach, 1964; Douglas, 1975). Since sociological interest is typically focused on interaction, particularly in the study of everyday life; and, since interaction is grounded in categories of social meanings, questions of how human beings shape nature, investing it with symbolic significance and engaging it in person, can be central to a sociology of everyday life.

Tuan (1984), for instance, contends that humans dominate nature before they can establish affectionate bonds with it. In all cultures, plant growth is restricted, fish are contained and animals kept juvenile so that humans may feel affectionate toward rather than terrified by nature. Fine (forthcoming) has examined the ways in which culture and nature join among mushroom gatherers who operate with very specific and detailed classifications of "nature." They know what kinds of mushrooms there are, and they operate on the basis of definitions of natural environments for mushroom growing. Often their conceptions of nature conflict with ones more widely distributed in society. They decry the encroachment of society in the form of parking lots which

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destroy prime "mushroom-growing" fields, and they see setting aside nature preserves as "natural."

Hickrod and Schmitt (1983) discuss the emotional attachment of humans to pets as an instance of "keying." They use Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis to suggest that the keying of a dog, as pet, depends on a primary frame, family; and is marked, like all keyings, by temporal and spatial cues. By following the process of keying a pet, they reveal the ways in which pets take on meaning as a part of a family. Finally, Perin (1988) identifies the "perfect dog" in terms of ambivalence reflected in the way people care and do not care for their pets. She discusses the peculiar relationships people have to dogs and the impact of these relationships on other arrangements in the American household and on neighbors.

This paper is about a particular instance of human tinkering with nature, the English Bulldog. It shows, through ethnographic description, how the dog is a cultural product and, as such, a synthesized conception of society and nature. Moreover, a semantic-structural analysis of Bulldogs as cultural products links the ambiguous character imputed to them to questions about the forms which nature can assume in everyday life.

Data for this study were gathered in several ways. First, as an owner of an English Bulldog, I was already in contact with breeders. They, in turn, suggested literature and related the "folklore" of the dog. I selected an informant in the dog world who raised several breeds of dogs, and was connected nationally with other breeders. This informant had a reputation for being knowledgeable about manners of judging and breeding. I interviewed him approximately twenty times over a period of several months. I also attended meetings of a local Bulldog club and observed several dog shows.

### The Bulldog Itself: Bred for Social Meaning

The Bulldog is an outstanding example of exaggerated dog-physiology as a result of breeding for social meaning. Its appearance suggests combat and aggressiveness, yet its disposition is pacific. This juxtaposition of oppositional meanings creates an animal of ambiguous appearance. People may be afraid of it, or find its appearance "humorous." While not a popular pet, the Bulldog maintains a "celebrity status" in popular movies such as *Tightrope*, *Dune* and *Stakeout*. It is also prominent as a logo for a truck company, an advertising agent for