***What is cooperative breeding? Removing definitional barriers for comparative research***

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Despite a century-old interest in cooperative breeding (i.e. where alloparents care for the offspring of others), inconsistent definitions of this breeding system hamper valid comparisons between studies, disciplines and taxonomic groups. Here, we discuss these inconsistencies, focusing on (i) the required type and extent of alloparental care, and (ii) whether only species with non-breeding helpers should be classified as cooperative breeders. To overcome the first inconsistency, we propose a qualitative definition of proactive alloparental care and minimum thresholds for its extent. For the second inconsistency, we show that after accounting for methodological biases, evidence for social groups with non-breeding helpers only are currently available for a small fraction of mammal and bird species. We thus suggest considering these species as the end of a reproductive-sharing continuum among cooperative breeding species, rather than a qualitatively different breeding system. We conclude by proposing a modular definition for cooperative breeding which adjusts the type of species selected to the specific question being addressed. The flexibility and explicit criteria of this definition enable to address different hypotheses while maintaining valid comparison between meta-analyses.