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A Case Study of Preferential Bestiality

Christopher M. Earls · Martin L. Lalumière

Received: 21 June 2007 / Revised: 31 August 2007 / Accepted: 31 August 2007 / Published online: 22 December 2007
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Abstract In a previous article, we presented phallometric data to illustrate a case of preferential bestiality or zoophilia (Earls & Lalumière, *Sex Abuse: J Res Treat*, 14:83–88, 2002). Based on the available literature, we argued that a marked preference for having sex with animals over sex with humans is extremely rare. In the present article, we describe a second case of zoophilia that challenges the widely held assumptions that men who have sex with animals are generally of below average intelligence and come from rural areas. In addition, we provide a brief review of a burgeoning quantitative literature using large groups of zoophiles recruited from internet sources. Although estimates of the prevalence of zoophilia are not possible at this time, it appears that zoophilia is not as rare as once thought and shares many features with other atypical sexual interests.

Keywords Zoophilia · Bestiality · Paraphilias

Introduction

In a previous article, we described a case of preferential bestiality or zoophilia (Earls & Lalumière, 2002).¹ The participant was an incarcerated inmate who presented not only a

strong sexual interest in horses but also a preference for sexual interactions with mares over humans. In a phallometric assessment, he showed sexual arousal to pictures of horses and no arousal to other species, including humans. We argued, based on published case studies and a few quantitative studies of highly selected samples, that cases of preferential bestiality are rare and often involve individuals suffering from mental retardation and residing in rural areas.

Following the publication of our study, several journalists contacted us with requests for additional information concerning bestiality. One article was featured in a local university newspaper. To our surprise, we received a number of letters from individuals who either had additional information concerning acquaintances who engaged in sexual relations with animals or from individuals who, themselves, were currently engaging in such relations. Even more surprising was the fact that some of these letters appeared to come from highly educated professionals.

Unfortunately, although intriguing, it was impossible to establish the veracity of most letters. One, however, was sent electronically. This letter was long, detailed, and signed “Possum”. Embedded within the electronic information was a name. By cross referencing the name with various data banks (e.g., the Social Sciences Citation Index, Google, and Yahoo), we were able to verify several important demographic aspects of the author. Almost simultaneously, the author also realized that he had inadvertently divulged his identity. Over a series of e-mails, we became satisfied that the information supplied by the author was, in fact, true. We were also able to obtain his permission to publish the following case study.

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¹ Some authors have also used the phrase “zoosexual orientation” to denote a sexual preference for animals (e.g., Beetz, 2004). In the present article, we make a distinction between the behavior of having

Footnote 1 continued
sex with an animal (bestiality) and a clear preference for engaging in sex with animals (zoophilia or preferential bestiality).

Case Report

Possum was a 47-year-old white male living in close proximity to a major metropolitan center. He was born into a middle class family and was the second of four children. Possum reported that his “early childhood was completely unremarkable [...] without particular stresses or strains of any note.” He noted that he had no recollection of “neglect, abuse or other adverse forces in my early years. My three siblings have all grown up ‘normal’ and are now married with children. My parents are still together.”

Despite a relatively unremarkable adolescence, he reported feelings of being different, particularly concerning contacts with members of the opposite sex:

As I grew into adolescence my sexual ideation was different to what it was supposed to be. I looked at horses the same as other boys looked at girls. I watched cowboy movies to catch glimpses of horses. I furtively looked at pictures of horses in the library. This was before the internet and I felt totally isolated. I was a city boy. I had never seen a horse up close, never touched or smelled one. No one in my family had any contact with horses, but for me, they held a powerful, wonderful, and, yes even—well primarily—sexual attraction. I had no idea that there were others like me in the world. I tried to be normal. I tried to get interested in girls, but for me they were always foreign, distasteful and repulsive. A couple of early adolescent sexual explorations... were mechanical, forced and unsuccessful.

In spite of being from the city, Possum reported that he was able to initiate contact with horses: “At the age of 14, I found out where the closest horse paddocks were. I cycled there at night. I spent hours just standing in the paddocks, learning their ways, watching them, being with them, getting closer and closer. When I got close enough to touch them, I learned how nice a horse feels, and in particular how astonishingly wonderful a horse smells.” Possum reported that at the age of 17 he had his first sexual relation (penile–vaginal) with a horse. Over the following years, he purchased a mare, took riding lessons, and had numerous sexual interactions with her. He described his first encounter as involving a long courtship:

At first, I didn’t even know that you can’t get close to a horse by sneaking up on it! They have millennia of programming to be suspicious of such approaches! You need to be open: Non threatening, body language is subtle but critical; they read you like a book. But when that black mare finally just stood there quietly while I cuddled and caressed her, when she lifted her tail up and to the side when I stroked the root of it, and when she left it there, and stood quietly while I climbed upon a bucket, then, breathlessly, electrically, warmly,

I slipped inside her, it was a moment of sheer peace and harmony, it felt so right, it was an epiphany.

While in his early 20s, Possum searched the scientific literature and consulted several mental health professionals in hopes of finding an explanation for his sexual preferences. “I searched textbooks in the bowels of the university. The references that I found were rare, and to my mind, wrong. They talked of retarded farm workers, who couldn’t get real women, not normally functioning individuals who simply preferred horses to humans.”

At the age of 28, he obtained an M.D. from an accredited university and found employment as a medical researcher. Shortly thereafter, he married and had two children. He attempted to suppress his sexual interest in horses but to no avail:

When I was first married, I tried so hard to be good and didn’t have any sexual contact with equines for about a year. After that, I couldn’t suppress it any more and my contact with the horses rose while my relations with my wife declined. I tried to be a normal husband but human sex always felt wrong, I could do it but I couldn’t learn to like it [...] Even closing my eyes and pretending she was a horse didn’t work after a while.

At the time of writing, Possum was divorced and his two teen-aged children were living with their mother. Over the last 20 years, he has published numerous scientific papers in well known and peer reviewed journals. He currently considers his lifestyle as “affluent”: He drives a luxury sports car and owns a small farm on the outskirts of a major city. He describes his life as happy and his relationship with horses as very satisfying:

I moved to my own house and land, taking my two mares with me. They are my mare-wives now, each day I can get out of bed, look out the window, and instantly see them. They come up at night to be fed. I can go out and sit with them, or stroke them or hold them or be with them at any time I want. Life’s good. I walked a long, hard road, largely without a map and I took some wrong turns, I had pain and despair and helplessness, but in the end I found the right path, reached my destination and now I am happy and at peace.

The reason that Possum contacted us was to suggest that we, like others before us, had presented a stereotypic but erroneous image of zoophilia. In his words, “You published one case study and I am another one. Who determines which one is typical?” Obviously, this case is markedly different from the one we presented in 2002.

It is generally held (and taught) that the scientific value of the case study is not only its usefulness in studying rare phenomenon but also its ability to generate hypotheses (Kazdin, 1998). In this context, it is useful to present an overview of

several hypotheses offered by a zoophile trained in the scientific method. He raised three distinct questions concerning bestiality and zoophilia: (1) the accuracy of reports claiming that individuals who engage in sexual relations with animals are generally mentally retarded individuals residing in rural areas, (2) the psychopathological nature of bestiality and zoophilia, and (3) the etiology of zoophilia.

Discussion

Zoophiles are stereotypically viewed as mentally deficient farm workers. Indeed, when examining the literature, it is common to find descriptions of people engaging in sex with animals as being of below normal levels of intelligence, having little education, and coming from rural areas (Duffield, Hassiotis, & Vizard, 1998; Hensley, Tallichet, & Singer, 2006; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; McNally & Lukach, 1991; von Krafft-Ebbing, 1950). Of course, we might expect a higher base rate of sexual contact with animals in rural regions; however, the popular and widely held view that zoophiles are generally of below normal intelligence is in fact not always supported in the case study literature. At least one author has presented a description of zoophiles who were well adjusted and well functioning in the community: von Krafft-Ebbing discussed the case of a man who was intelligent and well educated who could only obtain erections when fantasizing about men on horses. Kinsey et al. also downplayed the pathological aspects of zoophilia by noting that sexual contact with animals can sometimes be viewed as a “substitute” for contact with adults. Similarly, Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy, and Christenson (1965) discussed bestiality in the context of sexual experimentation.

More recently, investigations of zoophilia have moved beyond the case study method. There have been several quantitative group studies of community samples. The emergence of these studies is due in large part to the availability of internet sites devoted to zoophilia or bestiality. Although one must be wary of reports from sometimes unverifiable sources, the internet provides an unparalleled source of potentially zoophilic individuals from the general community. Of course, these samples remain highly selected but for different reasons than samples of psychiatric patients or inmates (i.e., we could expect internet survey samples to be computer sophisticated and more open to discussing their sexuality). The group studies conducted to date suggest that some men and women who admit having had sex with animals have a clear preference for such activities. In addition, the data obtained from internet surveys reveal that sex with animals is rarely a substitute for sex with humans, and that many respondents live happy and productive lives.

For example, via the internet Miletski (2000, 2005) recruited 82 men and 11 women who admitted having had sex

with animals. Miletski was careful to screen participants by phone or personal contact before administering the questionnaire. The average age of the participants was 38 years old and almost half were college graduates. The majority (71%) of participants reported being well adjusted in their current lives and most (94%) saw no reasons to cease having sex with animals. Like Possum, the majority of respondents experienced sexual fantasies involving animals prior to their first sexual contact with an animal, and over two-thirds reported that their current sexual fantasies primarily or exclusively involved animals. Although some participants reported greater sexual attraction to humans, over half of participants reported greater sexual interest for animals than for humans. Contrary to reports by Gebhard et al. (1965) and Kinsey et al. (1948), very few of Miletski's participants reported that sex with animals was a substitute for human sex or engaged in sex with animals because of lack of opportunity for sex with humans.

Two other studies have confirmed Miletski's (2005) main findings using similar methodologies. Beetz (2004) reported on a sample of 113 men and 3 women recruited via the internet who admitted sexual contacts with animals (predominantly dogs). For a little more than half of the participants, sexual contact with animals was preferred over contact with humans, and about three-quarters of participants reported a strong emotional attachment to the animal companion. Many of the participants reported that their first sexual fantasies of sex with animals occurred between the ages of 12 and 15.

Beetz (2004) also described individuals who reported experiencing “species dysphoria” or the sense of being in the wrong (species) body. These individuals expressed a desire to be an animal, often of the same species as the love object. One wonders if, as is the case with a type of male gender dysphoria (autogynephilia; Blanchard, 1989; Freund & Blanchard, 1993; Lawrence, 2006), some people are actually sexually aroused by the idea of *being* an animal. Gates (2000) described individuals (called *furvetts*) who enjoy wearing cartoon animal costumes for sexual gratification.

Finally, Williams and Weinberg (2003) identified 114 zoophilic men from websites and a visit to a zoophile gathering on a farm. These men were young (median age of 27) and well educated (83% had completed or attended college). Williams and Weinberg presented brief testimonials of genuine affection for and clear enjoyment of sex with animals, especially dogs and horses. Similar to the data reported by Beetz (2004), some participants expressed a desire to be an animal or stated that they had animal characteristics. Almost half of the men started having sex with animals between the ages of 11 and 14. Over two-thirds stated that they preferred sex with animals over humans. Another interesting result from the study was that there appeared to be a certain degree of concordance between human gender sexual orientation and animal gender sexual orientation: Heterosexual men, for example, tended to prefer sex with female animals.

It is not surprising that the characteristics of groups of individuals who regularly engage in sex with animals will depend on the recruitment method and thus be influenced by an ascertainment bias. Those recruited from hospitals will show more general pathology; prison samples will show more extensive criminal histories; sex offender samples will show other atypical sexual interests more often; and internet samples will show better adjustment and perhaps better intellectual skills. These sample variations can be taken into account by using a carefully constructed comparison group recruited with the same methods, something that, to our knowledge, has not yet been done.

Efforts to understand the etiology of zoophilia will require carefully distinguishing between bestiality as a behavior (in this case a sexual interaction with an animal) and zoophilia as a preference (a choice of having sex with an animal when a human sexual interaction is also available). The study of pedophilia and sexual offending against children, for example, has greatly benefited from distinguishing between a sexual attraction towards children (pedophilia) and actual sexual behaviors directed at children (Seto, 2008). Earlier suggestions that sexual relations with animals may be associated with poor intellectual and social skills, rural areas, and lack of opportunities for sex with human partners may be correct when considering bestiality, but may not be correct when considering zoophilia.

Based on the limited research available, it is difficult to make clear suggestions regarding the etiology of zoophilia (as a preference). A few facts, however, need to be considered. First, zoophilia seems to be an overwhelmingly male phenomenon (there are few cases of female zoophiles and these are often partners of male zoophiles). Second, zoophilia appears very early in life and, like Possum, seems to be “discovered” by the individual rather than “chosen.” Very often the discovery of attractions towards animals precedes actual sexual behaviors with animals. Finally, zoophilia is often associated with other atypical sexual interests, although here ascertainment bias may be responsible for this finding (internet surveys have not asked about other atypical sexual interests, but a disproportionate number of zoophiles recruited via the internet report a bisexual or homosexual human sexual orientation). The astute reader will recognize that these three facts (maleness, early development, and co-morbidity with other atypical sexual interests) are also true of most if not all paraphilias, suggesting common determinants.

It seems that the male sexual preference system is more vulnerable than the female preference system with respect to developmental perturbations. These perturbations must occur early, most likely before puberty, and could very well occur in the absence of relevant sexual experiences. In all paraphilias, the sex object or activity is such that reproductive success

would be lowered in ancestral environments. We hypothesized elsewhere that the degree of fitness loss associated with a paraphilia should be inversely proportional to its population frequency (Earls & Lalumière, 2002), a hypothesis that has not been tested so far. Possum, after 10 years of research on the internet, suggested that “preferential zoophilia is an astonishingly rare condition,” as one would expect from our hypothesis. Studies of bestiality and zoophilia may very well greatly contribute to our emergent understanding of the origins of paraphilias.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank David Brousseau, James Cantor, Meredith Chivers, Vern Quinsey, Michael Seto, Annabree Simpson, Kelly Suschinsky, and Paul Vasey for providing useful feedback on an earlier version of this article. Paul Vasey also brought to our attention the phenomenon of furbets. This work was supported in part by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Standard Research Grant awarded to M.L.L.

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