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Why People Who Have Sex with Animals Believe That It Is Their Sexual Orientation—A Grounded Theory Study of Online Communities of Zoophiles

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ABSTRACT

This study explores online spaces of zoophiles. Relevant discussion forums, specializing in mental health, were identified through having threads on “sexuality,” “paraphilias,” and “zoophilia.” Thematic analysis includes responses of 138 participants (135 exclusive zoophiles, and three zoophiles with pedophilic tendencies). Trend analysis identified most frequently discussed topics: animals as an object of love; emotional closeness with animals; what are paraphilias; can animals consent to sex with humans; misunderstanding terminology of zoophilia/bestiality. First, zoophiles frequently ask why zoophilia is considered an act of bestiality if the term to them means “to murder.” Second, zoophiles believe that animals have an intrinsic ability to consent to sexual behaviors involving people. Third, most messages pointed to the lack of emotional support from the family and widespread public contempt.

Introduction

Zoophilia is a paraphilia defined as an intense interest in having sexual contact with animals, and is a rarely investigated psychiatric condition in the forensic literature (Sendler and Lew-Starowicz 2018). In many existing studies, authors have investigated zoophilia in the context of other behaviors or phenomena—for instance, pornography consumption, sexual offending, and homosexuality (Munro and Thrusfield 2001; Zillmann, Bryant, and Carveth 1981). In clinical studies, zoophilia is often described as a behavior harmful to the person and animals (Holoyda 2017). Meanwhile, using community-based samples, others have asked whether zoophilia is a sexual orientation (Miletski 2005, 2016). All of these instances illustrate the non-uniform approach to explain a rare incidence of an unusual sexual preference.

The fact that some people have sexual interest in animals is an interesting phenomenon from various perspectives—including the scientific, medical, or cultural influences. Yet, zoophilia represents only one of many instances a spectrum of unusual sexualities or sexual urges that we are beginning to study, using clinical and non-clinical research samples (Sendler 2018). Although zoophilia is a form of a mental condition that can be treated by a psychiatrist, it might also co-occur with other medical problems, including penile cancer and Parkinson’s disease (Carstens and Stevens 2016; Holoyda and Newman 2014; Ranger and Fedoroff 2014). Within the socio-cultural context, zoophilia has often been described as—de facto—a kind of non-pathological human–animal bond (Adams et al. 2010). Though, the behavior is widely considered as unacceptable and posing harm to the well-being of animals.

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From the legal point of view, zoophilia is definable as an act of abuse of animals, punishable by either imprisonment, financial restitution, or both (depending on the legal jurisdiction of a given country where bestiality is prosecuted). In most cases of proven bestiality, zoophiles are enrolled into institutional treatment (Carstens and Stevens 2016; Holoyda and Newman 2014; Ranger and Fedoroff 2014). The first step to determining guilt is a physical evaluation by a physician. Recently, numerous clinical cases reported on injuries resulting from sex with animals (Blevins 2009; Sandler 2017; Virgilio, Franzese, and Caterino 2016). For instance, we know the difference and the extent of bodily harm among people who have sex with animals, depending on who is penetrating who; If an animal is violently penetrating a human partner, then we expect bleeding inside the anal canal as well as presence of the perineal scratches; If the human is the penetrating partner, we typically see deep, intra-anal injuries within the animal's reproductive and/or intra-anal canal (Sandler 2017). These clinical presentations help in determining the extent of danger caused by zoophilic acts and serve as evidence in legal cases against zoophiles. There are other studies that examined zoophilia, using internet-derived sample of participants.

There have been proposals for re-classifying zoophilic tendencies to reflect pleasurable and harmful intentions that zoo-individuals might have toward animals (Aggrawal 2011). Aggrawal believes that a 10-tier categorization of the acts of zoophilia would improve writing forensic descriptions. The caveat of this proposal is that we do not have enough clinical or community-derived evidence to adequately re-classify zoophilic tendencies. Therefore, future research will need to revisit these classifications schema and update them accordingly.

The objective of this study is to present the qualitative analysis of discussion forum conversations of self-identified zoophiles. The underlying hypothesis of this research was that zoophiles search for help on the Internet; by accessing online spaces, they share information about their sexuality, daily lives, daily struggles, and offer a look into understanding how they self-perceive their sexuality.

Methods

The unit of analysis of this study was Internet forum responses. Using DEVONagent Pro, version 3.9, we searched the entire web, identifying relevant forum discussions threads on “sexuality,” “paraphilias,” and “zoophilia.” The search was conducted in January and again in February 2016 to reach data saturation. Discussion topics with a minimum of 200 replies were archived into the database. Responses of each nicknamed user were tracked and evaluated for consistency in engaging in the written debates, contextually relevant to zoophilia or animal bestiality. After the data were archived, we used MAXQDA, version 12, to qualitatively evaluate information provided by all participants, using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Each speech line was coded with a topic node. Subsequently, nodes were grouped thematically and re-analyzed to yield a list of discussion trends; these trends essentially summarize the concerns that zoophiles have, their daily living activities, and interactions with friends and strangers. The final results report qualitative trend analysis and word frequencies to showcase the context of all conversations.

User-provided data (in the public profiles) were collected and quantified to obtain demographic information. All responses were archived as text transcripts; the original forms were downloaded and grouped thematically into a single database. All basic, self-provided, information about participants were preserved, including activity level (expressed in the average number of replies/posts), geo-referencing to posting location (expressed as posts/responses and the country of origin).

To ensure ethical analysis of the data, we have also analyzed the user consent for each forum. The forum had to require, or grant, the users the following conditions of safe participation.

First—participants willingly signed up for the account, based on the self-selected fetish/interest discussion thread.

Second—each discussion thread had its content-specific consent (for instance, in pedophilic threads, participants had to understand that, although their participation was to seek help, their responses might be under surveillance by the law enforcement or other third-party entity).

Third—the language of the consent ensured that people participating in the discussions specified their position as either the person seeking help or providing support for others. This distinction allowed us to categorize participants based on their intentions to participate in online discussion community, improved understanding of why people chose to take part in an unpopular discussion topic, and to see how being a zoophile reflects the general understanding of the help-seeking behavior for paraphilias.

Next, we wanted to ensure proper qualification of participants as zoophiles (or at least having self-described traits of someone who is sexually attracted to animals).

First, the user had to engage in at least five postings within the topic forum related to zoophilia only.

Second, there had to be at least three postings related to fantasizing about zoophilic sex, evidencing keen interest in the topic.

Lastly, we looked at the interaction between users and how they talked about zoophilia (=in subjective terms, how the users reflected on their sexuality, using non-nominal terms related to descriptions of feelings, safety, legality of their behavior, and worldview).

The strength of these measures is that we can track and study responses of people who have intrusive sexual thoughts—and differentiate and study in detail those who seek help. The underlying sub-hypothesis is that people use online networking not only to chat and meet other people, but to also seek answers to understand their sexual self.

We have received ethics committee institutional approval to conduct this research, and report that no user data were compromised or affected by this retrospective online ethnographic study.

Disclosures: The views and opinions presented in this study are representative of the input provided by participants only. The author is not responsible for any controversial remarks. All data synthesis is based on in-depth qualitative analysis of conversations that zoophiles have on the Internet.

Results

Our sample consists of 138 participants, of which 121 individuals were male, and 17 were female. For male participants—90% indicated the sexual preference for small animals (e.g., dog), and 10% liked large animals (e.g., horse). All female participants preferred small animals. Comorbidity of pedophilic fantasizing was high of 20% for men and 6% of women participants (determined by qualitatively quantifying self-described sexual urges concerning having sex with minors). Yet only three participants identified as pedophiles who have acted on their urges in the past.

We thematically coded 1,245 segments of text, yielding 268 topic nodes. Five main discussion themes were identified and described—(1) Genetics of zoophilia; (2) Law of nature; (3) Legality of sex with animals; (4) Can animals consent; (5) Love to animals comparable to human love. We recorded 68 data memos, which helped in describing the reflections about the data as the analysis was progressing. In total, 1,385 user entries were used to generate results.

To better understand the language use of our participants, we performed lexicon analysis; this measure also helped us in confirming that the content of the discussions were related to zoophilia. The number of words used to generate this quantification was $n = 42,742$. All words were at least 4-characters long to exclude modifiers (e.g., “and,” “the”) that would impact quantification of context analysis. The number of words that reached significance was $n = 5,397$ with an association score of $TRR = 0.1263$ (the closer the TRR value is to the score of zero, the more significant are the results). The most frequently used terms in discussions were “sex” (1,806 hits), “dog” (600 hits), “feeling” (186 hits), “zoophile” (156 hits), and “pedophile” (156 hits)—indicating that our analysis justifiably coded for conversations related to zoophilia.

First theme: genetics of zoophilia

In their conversations, zoophiles frequently referred to the knowledge of genetics and how it is singly the most legitimate science explaining the roots of their non-normative sexual attraction to animals. Zoophiles believe that, within the animal kingdom, there are many instances of species engaging in

sexual activities with each other. The reasoning behind how zoophiles justify their relationship with animals is grounded in the theory that genetics predisposed all existing species to engage in sexual activity. As animals cannot know where their urges come from, zoos believe that genetics explains these behaviors, and is—de facto—soon to be proven explanation of their non-normative sexual interests.

“There is no God. Only the law of genetics. As we are born, the blueprints for the people we shall become are laid out. Our control over reality is an illusion. Our neurons will fire and our brain will behave as it is programmed regardless of what we do. The choices we make, the beliefs we have, the way we view the world, it is all predetermined by our genetics and our past experiences. We are on a train, going in one direction, no way of and no way to escape. It will always arrive at death. Always.”—Mark155

Several zoophiles said that the lack of common language (=where the language is definable as uniform, understandable by all, exchange of information, e.g., English in modern days) between all species, hampers animals’ ability to consent to sex with people verbally. Therefore, animals use various elements of physical coercion to have sex with people. In their conversations, zoophiles show the understanding that, if the particular animal does not want to engage in sex, their body language indicates such non-consent to have sex.

Second theme: law of nature

In as many as 50% of analyzed responses, zoophiles believe that we do not know what the nature wants (aside from an ongoing evolutionary change that affects all of us); what this means is that no one can say that zoophilia is “unnatural” as it has persisted through time. Zoophiles think that the process of evolution intentionally made some of us, humans, inclined to engage in the act of sex with animals. Zoophiles see humans as part of the animal kingdom; by extension, any sexual activity that occurs within that framework of the natural world is biologically ascribed—and natural (=normal).

“If you do not like using nature as an appeal, what is your debate at all? Dogs and humans are nature; you cannot argue ‘it’s wrong because dogs and humans wouldn’t x’ without appealing to nature”—Ellimist

Within the discussions about the nature, zoophiles often discuss the roots of stigmatization against them. Although most of these conversations are somewhat philosophical, the most frequent argument for legalizing zoophilic acts is related to destigmatization of homosexuality. Here, zoophiles attempt to define and negotiate what are the defining features of a paraphilia—and whether zoophilia is a paraphilia. To prove their point, they share and discuss various articles, both research and popular writings, that empirically or scientifically examined the concept of the normativity of sexuality; or, simply: why is it that psychiatrists decided that being gay is normal, but being a zoophile is abnormal. These discussions, while highly politicized and emotionally charged, show that the psychiatric diagnostic criteria have a profound influence on how zoophiles perceive themselves. Furthermore, the unspecific diagnosis of a paraphilia or paraphilic disorder disengages zoophiles from seeking professional help as they indicate distrust in the current treatment protocols. Fifteen individuals noted distrust in therapist’s integrity as a reason for choosing to talk about their paraphilia on the Internet instead.

Most of our participants believe that there is not much published research that supports the validity of the current diagnosis of zoophilia. They also believe that, due to the lack of more knowledge about this specific paraphilia, not many clinicians are competent to help them. The main form of confirmation of these allegations is an argument that there is no effective pharmacological treatment for zoophilia. A third of participants agrees that there is no scientific proof of the pathological mechanism of zoophilia—a claim they base on the self-directed literature review. In multiple conversations, zoophiles copied and pasted passages from research papers in an attempt to discuss these findings and justify normativity of zoo-sexuality. These efforts usually end in erratic discussions about how to normalize zoophilia, frustrating some of the participants, who are unable to find clear answer as to whether their sexuality is “normal” or “abnormal”.

Third theme: legality of sex with animals

Zoophiles believe that they are stigmatized because people compare them to pedophiles. Some of our participants expressed an opinion that sex with animals is much more “normal” and justifiable than pedophilic urges. The root of this argument is that abused children did not know they have rights to not be sexually exploited by adults. In discussions concerning the legality of zoophilic sex, zoophiles say that human laws are hardly applicable to animals for a few reasons. First, humans do not know what animals want because of the language barrier. Second, people intrinsically abuse animals for own needs—food, clothes, and research.

“The real problem with zoophilia lies in consent. Even though the Basset hound down the street, grabbed your leg, and went to town, he cannot actually give consent. Much like someone who is heavily intoxicated. In any sexual relationship, consent is extremely important and animals just don’t have the intelligence, or communication skills, to be able to give that consent”—Webgoji

Zoophiles overwhelmingly agree that people subjugated animals and abuse them every day for own gain. Therefore, to them, zoophilia is no worst in violating animal rights than other human-driven activities.

Fourth theme: consent for sex with animals

Participants report that animals let them know when they want to engage in sex. They do so by coming forward and starting to lick various body parts of the human owner. Some of our respondents report that animals have very specific signs indicating consent, such as bringing a specific toy they normally do not use for playing, or barking a specific number of times.

“My dog will always make a strange little bark and will always try to lick my feet, or my head, with a very slight lick; and then lay on his back, continuing with that little bark, until I respond. If I do respond, he will either jump on me and fuck me like crazy, or he will turn his back to me, wanting me to do the same to him”—Nmyass

Importantly, participants have a belief that all cohabiting couples (whether human–human or human–animal) develop a specific language that only the two parties can understand. As such, zoophiles think that consent is an implied agreement between both partners and can be interpreted only in the context of a given relationship. Therefore, zoophiles disagree with the legal penalization of their acts; they see sex with animals as a matter of partnership between them and a pet; and they want to have the liberty to exercise the same rights to have sex with their partner as hetero- and homosexual couples do.

Fifth theme: love to animals comparable to human love

Zoophiles overwhelmingly believe that there is not a single definition of a relationship that would deny them the right to have sex with animals. They say that the law of the nature supports these views, since instances of interspecies relationships are known to biologists. To most zoophiles, being in a relationship with an animal implies having feelings for their partner, exhibiting emotions that show they care, and engaging in actions that show the pet that they are loved (both sexual and non-sexual; i.e., going on trips). Our participants believe that their love is quite the same as the love experienced between two human beings. Zoophiles understand the legal boundaries that incriminate their sexual relationship with animals. Though, they believe that the common laws are intended to cater to human-oriented partnerships, which posits bias toward non-normative sexualities.

“The dog was very happy after our sexual play was over, and seemed to want more, but I was too tired and exhausted to let him go on. He’d lick at my ears, gentle nibble my nose, or lick at my mouth as the days went on by. We were already close, but after the sexual activity that took place, the dog became more affectionate, and I realized it wasn’t just the sexual activity that I loved, but the dog too. He didn’t even want to mate with other dogs, and, from time to time, become sexually interested in me only.”—Lovingpegasister

Discussion

In thinking about zoophilia and how zoophiles feel about themselves, it is important to recognize that—within that community—zoophiles perceive having a connection with the animals as a step toward forming a committed relationship. Furthermore, many of our participants believe that they have a romantic relationship comparable to human love (based on companionship, trust, and interest in procreation).

To understand the zoophiles' self-perception, it is critical to view the entire subculture in comparison to other sexual minorities. Zoophiles, in comparison to the LGBT community (a group that has had the right to marry same-sex partners for at least several years, and who can bear children) believe that they have no support, or understanding, of the public whatsoever. Zoophiles believe that the LGBT community had an easier time gaining acceptance and the civil rights, because the group's level of stigmatization has been steadily decreasing each year. Moreover, being gay is no longer viewed as a disease (as per the diagnostic criteria of the DSM) (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Meanwhile, zoophilia remains categorized as a mental condition requiring treatment. In their discussions, zoophiles believe that until zoophilia remains on the list of the DSM diagnoses, their sexuality will remain highly stigmatized.

To understand zoophiles' point of view about the specificity of their love for animals, it is important to recognize their belief system—they believe that their attraction to animals is simply a different (yet still normative) expression of love. Zoophilia is—in a way—a kind of forbidden love. In fact, zoophiles often compare their struggles to the history of homosexuality; it was highly stigmatized until the early 1970s, later becoming “normalized” and removed from the list of psychiatric conditions from the DSM.

Our results indicate that all zoophiles view their attraction to animals as the common expression of love—comparable to the human–human bond. They use the discussion of the law of nature to argue that all love is created equally within the animal kingdom; by extension, the attraction a zoophile has to an animal is simply a love toward a different species. As all of us are part of the nature and animal kingdom, zoophiles make interesting justification for their attraction—genes. Genetic variation, according to our participants, explains why all of us love differently, including love toward people of the same gender or other species. If we follow the logic of gene theory, first described by Darwin (Darwin 1859) and more recently by Dawkins (Dawkins 2009), this study shows that the reason why zoophiles view their paraphilia as the standard expression of love is recognition of inter-species relationship—something that must have always existed.

According to our participants, the notion that the homosexual relationship is equal to the zoophilic relationship is twofold. First, both of these types of love remain highly stigmatized (primarily driven by social influences, prejudice). Second, both of these sexualities involve unconditional love, expressed as feelings, actions, and sexual attraction. Heterosexual relationships also occur within boundaries of the animal kingdom, so zoophiles view their love toward animals as equal to all kinds of love—straight, gay, and lesbian; to them, love occurs between species of the same natural habitat.

Another important aspect of zoophilic sexual play is the importance of having consent to have sex, which is implied by animals through physical interaction. One way of trying to understand zoophile's understanding of consent in sex is it to look into the culture of sadomasochism (BDSM). The BDSM culture has a clear understanding of what is consent, and it may come in various forms: written, verbal, or a combination of both. Consent can also take a form of physical cues that one receptive partner might convey to the dominant partner, letting them know whether they are agreeing to with what is being done to them sexually.

In comparison to zoophiles, the notion of having consent to have sex with animals differs significantly. Our participants explain their sexual play with animals as consensual on grounds of physical interaction: they receive physical (e.g., licking) or behavioral (e.g., jumping, rolling around) cues that signalize consent to have sex; That opens up a very delicate discussion about what animals want, and how

we know that they want it. This study did not aim to address the nature of interpreting the animal language, as this is something that could be explored using bio-observational methods, similar to the work of eminent scientists like Jane Goodall's lifelong observation of chimps.

Our study was analytically optimized to use and study in-depth qualitative data from the Internet. These findings shed new light on the self-reflections of a non-clinical sample of zoophiles. There are other studies (Kavanaugh and Maratea 2016) that similarly, in a descriptive way, analyzed discussion forums to investigate paraphilias. Currently, many people are addicted to the Internet, so the use of the Internet in scientific research is increasingly becoming another source of data worth exploration. Given that paraphilias affect a small portion of the population, we felt that most of these individuals would seek help and support on the Internet. Rightly so, we identified the digital communities where these individuals interact; and we were able to retrospectively analyze the content of their conversations.

The primary limitation of this work is that the study gathered data from the online forums. As such, we were not able to confidently verify the validity of all information provided by participants, though our research methodology and content analysis are extremely similar to other studies of this type (Eliason, Streed, and Henne 2017). In studies related to paraphilias, it is difficult to recruit a large group of respondents—even if recruited online. The online discussion forum, dedicated to connecting people with paraphilias, is a viable place for studying how people understand their sexuality. The difficulty in recruiting zoophiles into a traditional questionnaire-based research is that they are worried about maintaining their anonymity. Obviously, the Internet can also be a dangerous place for zoophiles to share stories about their cohabitation practices with animals. However, the use of pseudonyms and encrypted connections are popular forms of retaining anonymity while talking about paraphilias online.

We were able to verify that the nature of discussions of each participant was zoophilic in all form and shape, as quantified by dictionary analyses. One method of verifying such information is to determine whether a participant is always actively describing her or his statements within the theme of the given paraphilia.

Our findings are interesting because they present a digital ethnographic assessment of why zoophiles around the world fight for legal rights to have a relationship with animals. Clinically, this work may help therapists understand how zoophiles perceive themselves, and what motivations drive their sexual and emotional attraction toward animals. There is no denying that literature investigating zoophiles is negligible, proving the high potential for further investigations exploring this paraphilia.

Conclusions

This article describes a retrospective, qualitative, analysis of discussion forum posts of people who have sex with animals. The goal of the study was to capture the essence of the debates that zoophiles engage in. The qualitative analysis identified discussion themes related to justifying zoophilia in the context of the evolution, animal consent for sex, and how social prejudice affects the everyday life of zoos. These data are helpful for psychologists, psychiatrists, and law enforcement agencies in developing expertise in understanding zoophilia—as self-described by zoophiles. The qualitative analysis described here proves useful in identifying, and studying, digital communities of people with paraphilias. These data have implications for psychological counseling and legal assessment of guilt of individuals accused of having sex with animals.

Notes on contributor

Damian Jacob Sandler is chief of sexology and clinical research programs, and director for the program in the study of sexual minorities and health policy at the Felnett Health Research Foundation. Spearheading research labs in New York and Warsaw, Dr. Sandler studies sexuality and sexual deviance through the lens of paraphilias and paraphilic disorders. His clinical and research interests center around understanding zoophilia, pedophilia, and sadomasochisms, using bio-psycho-socio-legal model.

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