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Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders Admitting to Sexual Activity with Nonhuman Animals

ABSTRACT

This study compared the family characteristics, victimization histories, and number of perpetration offenses of juvenile offenders who admitted to having had sex with animals to juvenile offenders who did not. The study found that 96% of the juveniles who had engaged in sex with nonhuman animals also admitted to sex offenses against humans and reported more offenses against humans than other sex offenders their same age and race. Those juveniles who had engaged in sex with animals were similar to other sex offenders in that they also came from families with less affirming and more incendiary communication, lower attachment, less adaptability, and less positive environments. Those juveniles who had engaged in sex with animals reported victimization histories with more emotional abuse and neglect and a higher number of victimization events than other offenders. This would seem to indicate that sex with animals may be an important indicator of potential or co-occurring sex offenses against humans and may be a sign of severe family dysfunction and abuse that should be addressed in the arenas of psychological intervention, juvenile justice programs, and public policy.

Sexual relations between humans and nonhuman animals, sometimes referred to as bestiality, is perhaps the least understood of all human/animal interactions. Studies of bestiality are difficult to conduct

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since bestiality carries a social stigma and generally is kept secret by those who have engaged in it. More than 50 years ago, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) estimated that between 10 and 20% of the general population of the United States has engaged in bestiality, with a slightly higher prevalence in rural settings and among poorly educated males. Although Kinsey's sampling techniques are considered unscientific by current standards, these high estimations suggested to some that bestiality should be viewed as a "normal" practice among some populations.

This raises questions about who engages in bestiality and whether it should be considered "normal." *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) classifies bestiality among the paraphilic disorders—deviant, but essentially victimless, forms of sexual gratification. According to Cerrone (1991), this classification suggests that bestiality is not a psychiatric problem in and of itself. Alvarez and Freinhar, (1991) found that bestiality may be more prevalent among psychiatric patients with major mental disorders than in the general population.

An alternative viewpoint on bestiality has emerged from the criminal justice literature. Beirne (1997) has proposed the notion of "interspecies sexual assault," arguing that sexual relations with animals parallel sexual assault against women and children, because in both instances there are issues of coercion, pain, and lack of consent. Studies of adult sex offenders appear to support the co-occurrence of sexual offenses against humans and animals among some offenders, with increasing numbers of incidents and animal victims occurring as offenders age (Abel, Osborne, & Twig, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the question of who engages in sex with animals and whether it should be considered normal. The study compares the family characteristics, victimization histories, and number of perpetration offenses of a group of juvenile offenders who admit to engaging in sex with animals with juvenile offenders who do not admit to bestiality. It was hypothesized that there would be no differences on these three variables between those juveniles who had engaged in sex with animals and those who had not. Although a study of juvenile offenders may not yield direct information about bestiality in the general population, we hoped that the study would yield useful information about the developmental issues for

juvenile offenders. Previous studies of juvenile offenders have indicated that their victimization histories and family characteristics are valuable in understanding the etiology of their offending behaviors (Blaske, Borduin, Henggeler, & Mann, 1989), and case studies with juvenile offenders suggest that their offending behavior can often be understood in the context of poor family relationships and parental conflict (Duffield, Hassiotis, & Vizard, 1998; Cerrone, 1991). In addition, we hoped that the study might contribute knowledge about how to approach future studies of bestiality in the general population.

Method

Participants

Three hundred and eighty-one (381) institutionalized, adjudicated, male youth offenders completed an anonymous self-report questionnaire. Participants were residents of three institutions in a Midwestern state that serve delinquent, high-risk youth, and their families. These institutions are the state's largest training school, the state's largest residential treatment center, and the state's largest non-profit group home setting. There were no differences between the youth in these three centers on any variables discussed in this article. The average age of the participants was 16.9 years, (S.D. 1.47). Of the youth, 55% were African American; 28%, white; 6%, Hispanic; and 11% identified themselves as from other ethnic identities, including Native American and Asian.

Recruitment & Selection

Because of the sensitive nature of the survey, elaborate steps were followed in securing permission to conduct the study. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan reviewed the project and gave it clearance. In each institution, administrators, clinical teams, and on-line staff were consulted for approval for each youth's participation. Across all three institutions, 14 youth were not approved because of clinical concerns (i.e. asking the youth questions about trauma might upset clinical work). Parental permission was sought for youths from the residential treatment center and the group home. Youths from the training school were wards of the state, and parental permission was not deemed warranted or feasible.

Upon clearance by the institution, the youths were approached following conventional research protocols regarding informed consent. Because the questions were about personal and potentially criminal behavior, youth were assured that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. The youths were assured that no individual responses would be shared with institutional personnel or with personnel from the criminal justice system. The youths were informed that aggregate data would be shared with institutions in order for the institution to assess whether their programs are addressing youth offender issues. There was no way to determine differences between those who participated in the study and those who were not allowed or did not wish to participate.

Administration of the Questionnaire

Trained research assistants and an on-site staff liaison facilitated group administration of the surveys by residence halls. All youth were administered identical survey instruments in a setting that allowed for individual privacy. Administration of the survey took approximately 2-3 hours, as youth were guided to stop after sections of the survey were completed. Frequent breaks and refreshments were provided at these breaks. A trained counselor was available for any youth desiring counseling during or after completion of the survey. Three youths used this service. As compensation, the researchers sponsored a pizza party for participating and non-participating youth two weeks after the survey.

Instruments

Sexual Abuse Exposure Questionnaire (SAEQ). A modified version of this 24-item instrument, originally designed by Ryan, Rodriguez, Rowan and Foy (1992), was used to assess the sexual victimization history of the juveniles. The instrument focuses on types of sexual abuse experienced, the juvenile's relationship to the perpetrator, and frequency of occurrence. Sexual victimization behaviors range from exposure to being penetrated. The SAEQ is superior to many instruments in that the juvenile is not asked whether he or she has been "sexually abused" but, rather, whether he or she has experienced a particular sex act. In this way, interpretation does not depend on the respondent's notion of sexual abuse but allows the researcher to consider sexual abuse that includes non-contact behaviors, contact behaviors, and pene-

tration. If the juvenile answers yes to any item, he or she is asked to supply details about the incident (relationship to perpetrator, frequency, duration). Examples of items include: "Has anyone ever shown you their private parts or exposed themselves to you?" and "Has anyone ever conned, or forced you, to let them put their penis into your private parts?" If the respondent indicates no to the question, he or she proceeds to the next question.

Self Report Sexual Aggression Scale (SERSAS).[2] For purposes of this study, the SAEQ was modified to inquire about acts of perpetration the juvenile has committed. The majority of the items in the SERSAS (Burton & Fleming, 1998) mirror those found in the SAEQ. Example items include: "Have you ever shown your private parts in front of a person or persons?" and, "Have you ever conned, or forced anyone to let you put your penis into their private parts?" The SERSAS includes a series of questions asking the youths if they had ever done anything sexual to an animal or animals, the nature of the activity, and their age at the time of the incident(s).

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ). The CTQ is a 53 item scale that provides a brief screening for victimization experiences in the juvenile's history, including child neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Bernstein, Ahluvalia, Pogge, & Handelsman, 1997). The CTQ also has a scale for "positive family environment." Juveniles responded with a Likert-type response (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to the stem sentence, "When I was growing up . . .," which was followed by specific items such as, "Someone in my family hit me or beat me"; "There was someone in my family whom I could talk to about my problems"; and "People in my family hit me so hard that it left me with bruises or marks."

Family Attachment and Changeability Index 8 (FACI-8). The FACI-8 (McCubbin, Thompson, & Elver, 1995a) is designed to measure family cohesion and adaptability in the juvenile's family-of-origin. The juveniles responded to 16 items (strongly agree to strongly disagree) including, "Our family tries new ways of dealing with problems"; "Family members are afraid to say what is on their minds"; and "Family members pair up rather than do things as a total family."

Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSCI). The FPSCI was used to assess the prevalence of incendiary and affirming styles of family communication (McCubbin, Thompson, & Elver, 1995b). Juveniles were asked to

respond to the stem sentence, "When our family struggles with problems or conflicts which upset us, I would describe my family in the following way. . . ." The stem is followed by 10 specific items such as, "We are respectful of each other's feelings"; "We yell and scream at each other"; and "We make matters more difficult by fighting and bringing up old matters."

Cronbach alphas for reliability and internal consistency were conducted on all scales, and were within acceptable ranges (.76 to .89).

Results

Prevalence of Sex with Animals

The SERSAS asks questions, such as "Have you ever done anything sexual to an animal or animals (on your own without being conned or forced to do so)?" and "Have you ever conned, or forced anyone to let you put your penis into their private parts?" Of the 381 juvenile offenders who completed the survey, 6% admitted to having done something sexual with an animal (Animal Offenders, n = 24). The average age of these juveniles at the time of their sex acts with an animal was 11.3 years old (S.D. 2.5). Forty-two % admitted to offending sexually against humans, but not to sex with animals (Sex offenders, n = 161), and 51% admitted neither to bestiality nor to any sexual offenses against humans (Non Sex Offenders, n = 196).

It is important to note that all 184 juvenile offenders (46% of the total sample) who answered "yes" to the second question essentially were admitting to some form of sexual assault on a person. These figures can be understood in the context of their adjudications, in that only 26% of the 381 total sample had been previously adjudicated for sex offenses. This means that 20% of the juveniles were admitting to offenses for which they had not been adjudicated. This is not unusual, because juvenile justice authorities estimate that the adjudication rate for sex offenses is only a small percentage of the offenses committed.

It is essential to recognize that 23 of the 24 juveniles who admitted to bestiality also admitted to having sexually offended against a human, although only 12 of the 24 had been adjudicated for sex offenses. Given that 23 of the 24 Animal Offenders admitted to sexual offenses against humans, the group

of Animal Offenders is essentially a sub-group of Sex Offenders, although only slightly more than half had been adjudicated for sex offenses.

Description of Sex Acts with Animals

The nature of the sex acts with the animals was determined through a series of follow-up questions. No information was solicited from the juveniles that would explain what their relationships were with these animals—companion animals, stray animals, animals on the farm, animals in the wild—or what the sex acts meant to them at the time they committed these acts. However, Table 1 indicates that 14 of the 24 juveniles indicated they had, "rubb[ed] my private parts against it," and 10 of the 24 admitted to "putting my penis into its private parts." Ostensibly, rubbing one's private parts against the animal or inserting one's penis would be acts of self-gratification, involving sexual intercourse with the animal or masturbation against it.

Two of the 24 juveniles indicated they had "inserted an object into the animal," and six had "inserted a finger into the animal." It is difficult to interpret what was accomplished by inserting fingers or objects into the animal, as these could be (a) acts of sexual curiosity (to see how the animal would react), (b) sexual gratification for the juvenile, (c) sexual sadism (by inflicting pain on the animal), or (d) some combination of these. Ostensibly, "putting one's mouth on the privates of the animal" would involve pleasuring the animal, and only 4 of the 24 juveniles admitted to this.

Because the purpose of this study was to learn as much as possible about the Animal Offenders, the researchers found it informative to distinguish Animal

Table 1. Description of Sex Acts with Animals

	INCIDENCES
Mouth on Animal	4
Rubbed Privates	14
Inserted Penis	10
Inserted Finger	6
Inserted Object	2

Offenders from both the Non Sex Offenders and the human-only Sex Offenders. Therefore, the data from the three groups (Animal Offenders, human-only Sex Offenders, and Non Sex Offenders) is separated out for comparison. Statistical analysis revealed no differences between the three groups in terms of age or racial composition, but analyses comparing the family characteristics and victimization histories of these three groups did find differences.

Family Characteristics

Table 2 indicates that both Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders come from families in which there is less affirming communication than in the families of Non Sex Offenders, F (1, 343) = 6.21 $p<.01$. The FPSCI has a possible range of 1-15 for affirming communication, with 15 indicating the most affirming communication. Mean scores on affirming communication for the three groups were 6.55 for the Animal Offenders, 9.40 for the Sex Offenders, and 10.23 for the Non-Sex Offenders. Post Hoc Scheffé analyses indicate that these means also indicate statistical differences between Sex Offenders and Animal Offenders in affirming communication ($p<.05$).

Table 2 indicates that Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders come from families with more incendiary communication than the families of Non Sex Offenders ($p<.001$). The FPSCI has a range of 0-15 for incendiary communi-

Table 2. Family Characteristics

	Affirming Communication		Incendiary Communication		Attachment		Adaptability		Positive Environment	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Non-Sex Offender	10.23^{**ABC}	4.12	6.37^{***ABC}	3.65	29.81^{***ABC}	6.60	22.05^{**ABC}	6.62	39.74^{***ABC}	9.16
Sex Offender	9.40^{*BC}	5.25	7.85	3.72	27.78	7.15	19.98	7.49	36.13^{**BC}	10.57
Animal Offender	6.55^{*BC}	4.31	8.68	3.84	25.05	5.92	18.45	8.01	28.41^{**BC}	9.60

$^{A=}$non-sex offender, $^{B=}$sex offender, $^{C=}$animal offender

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Higher score represents higher levels of attachment, adaptability and positive environment.

cation, with 15 indicating the most incendiary communication. The means scores for the three groups were 6.37 for Non Sex Offenders, 7.85 for Sex Offenders, and 8.68 for Animal Offenders. Post Hoc Scheffé analyses indicate no statistical differences between the families of Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders on incendiary communication.

Table 2 indicates that Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders come from families in which attachment is lower than in families of Non Sex Offenders F (1, 365) = 6.72 $p<.001$. The FACI-8 has a possible range of 8-40 with 40 indicating the highest levels of family attachment. Mean scores for the three groups were 25.05 for Animal Offenders, 27.78 for Sex Offenders, and 29.81 for Non Sex Offenders. Post Hoc Scheffé analyses indicate no statistical difference between Sex Offenders and Animal Offenders on family attachment.

Table 2 indicates that Sex Offenders and Animal Offenders come from families that are less adaptable than families of Non Sex Offenders F (1, 367) = 5.07 $p<.01$. The FACI-8 has a possible range of 7-35 on family adaptability, with 35 indicating the most adaptability. The mean scores for the three groups were 18.45 for Animal Offenders, 19.88 for Sex Offenders, and 22.05 for Non Sex Offenders. Post Hoc Scheffé analyses found no statistical differences between the families of Sex Offenders and the Animal Offenders on adaptability.

Table 2 indicates differences between all three groups on the variable of positive family environments, as measured by the CTQ, F (1, 334) = 13.29 $p<.001$. The positive family environment scale on the CTQ has a possible range of 10-50, with 50 indicating the most positive family environment. Animal Offenders come from families with the least positive family environments (M = 28.41), with Sex Offenders coming from substantially more positive family environments (M=36.13), and Non Sex Offenders indicating even more positive family environments (m = 39.74).

Victimization Histories and Perpetration Offenses

Table 3 exhibits the victimization and perpetration histories of the three groups as measured on the CTQ. The data indicate that both Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders have experienced more emotional neglect F (1, 378) = 14.06 $p<.001$, more physical abuse F (1, 378) = 12.88 $p<.001$, more emotional abuse F (1, 378) = 21.48 $p<.001$, and more sexual abuse F (1, 378) = 63.01 $p<.001$ than Non Sex Offenders. Post Hoc Scheffé analyses indicate that Animal Offenders

Table 3. Victimization and Perpetration Histories

	Physical Abuse		Emotional Abuse		Sexual Abuse		Emotional Neglect		Victimization		Perpetration	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Non-Sex Offender	2.22^{**ABC} CCC	1.26	2.13^{**ABC}	1.04	1.57^{**ABC}	0.69	2.05^{**ABC}	0.91	1.57^{**ABC}	2.53	na	na
Sex Offender	2.83	1.25	2.73^{*BC}	1.10	2.71	1.15	2.43^{*BC}	1.06	4.23^{**BC}	3.14	5.10^{**BC}	1.20
Animal Offender	3.11	1.07	3.35^{*BC}	0.89	2.81	0.98	3.11^{*BC}	0.92	6.13^{*BC}	3.52	6.86^{**BC}	2.75

^{A}=non-sex offender, ^{B}=sex offender, ^{C}=animal offender

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

had not experienced more physical or sexual abuse than Sex Offenders. However, they had experienced more emotional abuse ($p<.05$) and more emotional neglect ($p<.01$) than Sex Offenders.

The SAEQ and SERSAS permit examination of the number of victimization events for each juvenile along with the number of offending events they committed as a perpetrator. Table 3 indicates differences between all three groups, both in the number of victimization events reported F (4, 217) = 28.52 $p<.001$, and the number of offending events perpetrated against others F (4, 425) = 244.45 $p<.001$. Animal offenders reported more sexual victimization events (M = 6.13) than either Sex Offenders (M = 4.23) or Non Sex Offenders (M = 1.57). Animal Offenders also reported more offending events against humans (M = 6.86) than did Sex Offenders (M = 5.10)($p<.01$).

Discussion

This study compared the family characteristics, victimization histories, and number of perpetration offenses of three groups of juvenile offenders: (a) those who admitted to sex with animals (Animal Offenders), (b) those who admitted to sexual offenses against humans but not to bestiality (Sex Offenders), and (c) those who admitted to neither sex offenses against humans nor sex with animals (Non Sex Offenders). These three groups were identical in age and racial composition.

The data suggest that juvenile Animal Offenders should be considered a subgroup of Sex Offenders in that 23 of 24 juveniles (96%) who admitted to bestiality also admitted to sexual offenses against humans. These figures are based on the juveniles' self reports and almost double their actual adjudication rates for sex offenses. This is not unusual in that the number of adjudicated sex offenses in the general population falls far below the actual number committed. It appears that Animal Abusers may be further advanced than other juvenile sex offenders, in that they report substantially more perpetration offenses against humans than do other sex offenders (6.86 compared to 5.10, respectively).

Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders also shared a number of other commonalities. Both come from families with less affirming communication, more incendiary communication, lower attachment, less adaptability, and less positive environments than juvenile offenders who admit no sexual offenses. Also, the victimization histories of Animal Offenders and other Sex Offenders are similar. Animal Offenders and Sex Offenders had been victimized by more physical abuse, more emotional abuse, more sexual abuse, and more emotional neglect than Non Sex Offenders. They also had higher numbers of "victimization events" than Non Sex Offenders.

The study found that Animal Offenders actually report more problems than other Sex Offenders. Animal Offenders reported less affirming communication and less positive environments in their families than other Sex Offenders. Animal Offenders also reported more emotional abuse and neglect than other Sex Offenders, though not more physical and sexual abuse. The number of victimization events was substantially higher for Animal Offenders than for other Sex Offenders (6.13 compared to 4.23, respectively).

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the question of who engages in bestiality and whether this behavior should be considered "normal." It is difficult to assess "normality" in a study where all 381 participants were adjudicated juvenile offenders living in state facilities. However, within this population, the data indicate that the 6% of juvenile offenders who admitted to bestiality reported more problematic family characteristics and more traumatic victimization histories. They also reported having committed more sex offenses against humans than did other juvenile offenders. These findings

suggest that sex with animals should not be considered normal or benign among the juvenile population.

The findings of this study would seem to support Beirne's (1997) contention that bestiality actually is a form of "interspecies sexual assault," at least among adjudicated juvenile offenders. It is difficult to say whether the juveniles who had committed sex acts with animals would consider their behavior as a sex offense, but this would be a productive study to conduct in the future. The current authors believe that most juveniles, like adults, consider bestiality as deviant behavior, but not necessarily as a form of sexual assault. Public education programs might be necessary to bring this awareness to the general public.

An entire body of research in the last few years has shown that those who engage in cruelty against animals are more likely to engage in violence against humans (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Raupp, Barlow, & Oliver, 1997). The findings of the current study suggest that this link might be extended to include sex with animals, at least among some populations. The current study is limited in making this as an absolute generalization, because bestiality among populations other than male juvenile offenders was not examined. Juvenile offenders are, by definition, adjudicated for aggressive and violent offenses. It is possible that among other populations (single women and their pets), sex acts with animals might be performed out of love, the need for consolation, or other motivations. In these and other populations, there might not be any link whatsoever to offenses against humans. It is difficult to understand how the humans in these situations might view their own behaviors in terms of "mutual consent," or how they consider the pain, if any, to the animal participant, but this would be a worthwhile topic for future study.

The findings of the current study have important implications for violence intervention and prevention programs that are based on the link between animal cruelty and human violence (Jory & Randour, 2000; Flynn, 2000). These programs are postulated on the idea that early detection of animal abuse opens the door to psychological and social intervention, particularly among juveniles and young adults. The current study suggests that juveniles who engage in bestiality come from families with more severe problems and more emotional abuse than the "average" sex offender. This raises the questions of what neediness animal offenders may be acting out. Perhaps they are trying

to resolve attachment conflicts and anger problems by turning to animals for sexual gratification and release of tension. Further studies should explore the precise links between abusive and problematic family environments and sex acts with animals.

Few states have laws specifically prohibiting sexual contact with animals. However, the current study suggests that juvenile offenders who engage in bestiality are likely to be offending against humans as well. Those who promote legislation to curb social violence and protect the rights of animals might consider seeking extension of animal cruelty laws to include bestiality.

Although the average age of the juveniles in the current study at the time they first engaged in bestiality was only 11.3 years old, rubbing one's private parts against an animal, or inserting one's penis, fingers, or other objects into an animal's private parts goes beyond mere child-like curiosity. It is difficult to see how animals are capable of consenting to such sex acts, and it is likely that pain and injury accrue to many of the victims of these acts. Moreover, the finding that 23 of the 24 juveniles who engaged in bestiality in the current study reported also sexually assaulting humans is alarming and suggests that bestiality seldom occurs in isolation from other sex-offending among this population. Further studies are warranted to determine if bestiality in adolescence or pre-adolescence is a predictor of sex-offending in adulthood.

As indicated, further studies are warranted before broader generalizations can be made. However, this study offers analysis of a juvenile population that has not previously been made and provides a foundation for future empirical studies of bestiality in the general population.

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