

Furries and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al.

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Abstract

This is a response to an article published in *Society & Animals* in 2008 that argued for the existence of a “species identity disorder” in some furries. Species identity disorder is modeled on gender identity disorder, itself a highly controversial diagnosis that has been criticized for pathologizing homosexuality and transgendered people. This response examines the claims of the article (and the design of the study itself) and suggests that the typology it constructs is based on unexamined assumptions about what constitutes “human” identity and regulatory fictions of gender identity.

Keywords

furry fandom, gender, gender identity disorder, sexuality, species identity disorder

“Furries from A to Z (Anthropocentrism to Zoomorphism)” (Gerbasi et al., 2008) is the largest psychological study of furries published so far. Conducted at a 2007 furry convention in the United States attended by approximately 2,500 participants, the survey was aimed at testing four elements of furry fandom. The intention was to test the veracity of stereotypes about furries and to “explore furry characteristics” or, more specifically, to “begin to describe what is meant when an individual says ‘I am a furry’” (p. 199). The third and fourth goals of this survey were to ascertain whether or not furries “perceived” (p. 200) themselves as having personality disorders and whether or not furries might be described (by psychologists) as suffering from “species identity disorder”—a new “proposed construct” (p. 197) that the researchers based on gender identity disorder as it is described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, known as *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

The researchers found that 46% of furries surveyed were “distorted,” identifying “as less than 100% human” and therefore “may possibly represent a condition we have tentatively dubbed ‘Species Identity Disorder’” (p. 220).

Gerbasí et al. argue that this new “condition” displays “remarkable . . . parallels” and “striking . . . similarities” to features found in gender identity disorder (p. 220). Here I wish to problematize this study with regard to its design, its objectives, and its utilization of gender identity disorder as a foundation for species identity disorder, the implications of which will be of particular interest to those working in the area of animal studies and “humanimal” intersubjectivity specifically.

Furries are of particular interest in relation to the question of humanimal intersubjectivity because, like other anthrozoomorphics with whom they sometimes overlap (such as therians, cynanthropes, weres, animal people), furries can potentially confound assumptions about what constitutes the “human.” The subculture is largely made up of fans of humanimal animation, writing, and artwork and has a large presence on the Web. SecondLife and other forums are specifically devoted to exploring the myriad interests within furry fandom. Furries are commonly derided in homophobic Web-based discussions and stereotyped as fur-suited sexual fetishists, as depicted in television shows such as *CSI* and its episode “Fur and Loathing” (Stahl & Lewis, 2003).

Not surprisingly, Gerbasí’s research team was warned by the chairman of the convention it attended that, since they belong to a frequently derided subculture, many furries would probably avoid participating in their study. Nevertheless, 217 surveys were completed. The control group in the study consisted of 40 female and 28 male intermediate psychology students. The data on personality disorders showed that furries were less likely to judge other furries as disordered, while the control group (the psychology students) judged other college students “significantly more often” along the lines of personality trait disorders. That the control group was made up of psychology students is perhaps an important factor here; this group may display an increased sensitivity to normative behaviors and “disorder.” Furries, apparently less likely to judge other furries along the lines of personality trait disorders, might be displaying subcultural loyalty to the group, or perhaps by the very fact of their subcultural formation they are more open to *difference* in ways that do not conflate difference with psychiatric disorder. As one furry has commented to Shari Caudron: “This is a place for social acceptance and interaction, neither of which I had before” (Caudron, 2006, p. 203). While furries were not likely to pathologize each other, they were not asked to comment on each other in relation to the question of species identity disorder. That particular diagnosis or speculation was left to the psychologists to decide, which they did, finding that “the parallels between the distorted furry dimension and GID [gender identity disorder] criteria are remarkable” (p. 220). The study concludes that “much additional work is needed to replicate and validate both the furry typology and the proposed construct of species-identity disorder” (p. 220).

This “proposed construct” of species identity disorder does indeed require further analysis, not least because of its basis in gender identity disorder, whose controversial history is left out of Gerbasi et al.’s discussion. Indeed, their bibliography does not reflect any consultation with the literature on the subject of gender identity disorder, other than references to the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). It is worth noting that while gender identity disorder is problematized by approaches that position gender as a cultural and political formation constituted by regulation, transgression, and normativity as well as change and variation (Haraway, 2007; Butler, 1990, 2004; Burke, 1997; Connell, 1987, 1995; Sedgwick, 1994; Garber, 1993, among many others), it is also disputed by many psychologists whose work Gerbasi et al. might have been more likely to consult for their study.

Gender identity disorder has been included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association) since 1980. The *DSM* is updated and revised and republished every seven years because new disorders come into play, and older ones expire or are finessed into different typologies. For instance, the next edition of the *DSM* (V—due out in May 2013) may include “absexual” among its new disorders; “absexual” describes those who are titillated by complaining about the sexuality of others, particularly in relation to moral panics around nonconformist sexualities. Different cultures have different ideas around what constitutes a disorder. France dropped transsexualism as a psychiatric disorder in 2009 (*Le Monde*), but it is doubtful that the American Psychiatric Association will follow suit, given that Kenneth Zucker, international authority on gender identity disorder in childhood and current chair of the workgroup on sexual and gender identity disorders for the 2013 edition of the *DSM*, regards transsexualism as something to be averted in childhood.

Homosexuality was dropped from the *DSM* in 1973, but as it was dropped gender identity disorder came in (and was made official in the 1980 edition), leading many to argue that gender identity disorder represented the past, differently worded, enabling the continued treatment of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder (see Sedgwick, 1994). More recently, Karl Bryant (2008) has argued that those concerned with gender identity disorder in childhood (GIDC) are now focused on averting transgender outcomes in children because transgender is currently more feared by parents than homosexuality, since “transgender” is not a recognizable identity category in the way that homosexuality and heterosexuality are.

A diagnosis of gender identity disorder requires the satisfaction of the following criteria: first, a strong and persistent cross-gender identification and second, persistent discomfort with one’s sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. The latter criterion is very loosely defined and can include, for boys, “an aversion towards rough and tumble play and rejection of

male stereotypical toys, games and activities,” whereas girls must show a “marked aversion towards normative female clothing” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 537). Many critics have pointed out that such “symptoms” cannot be said to amount to a psychiatric condition but that the diagnosis itself points to a social investment in gender norms (Sedgwick, 1994). Niesen points out that the list of suspect behaviors associated with gender identity disorder “pathologises individuals while perpetuating sexist and heterosexist standards of behaviour as the only acceptable norm” (1992, p. 65). Another team of psychologists—Wilson, Griffin, and Wren—has argued that “the validity of the diagnosis of gender identity disorder is far from clear. What is apparent is that the criteria used in DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), emphasize the requirement for children and adolescents, especially boys, to conform to traditional gender and heterosexual norms” (2002, p. 348).

Treatment focuses on individuals who display gender nonconforming behaviors (rather than on those disturbed by those behaviors), as recommended by Rekers and Lovaas (1974), who justify treatment for gender identity disorder to “eliminate stereotyped feminine gestures that are often *of concern to parents* [emphasis added].”¹ Wilson et al. (2006) argue that the work of Zucker and Bradley (1995) shows that much of the “distress” suffered by individuals diagnosed with gender identity disorder is a “consequence of the perception of the behaviour by others, and not... a result of the behaviour itself” (p. 348).

So what kind of foundation might gender identity disorder provide for Gerbasi et al.’s “proposed construct of species identity disorder” (p. 197)? And how many furies in this survey might count as “diagnosable”? What might be the “treatment” for such a condition? The survey describes species identity disorder as the “persistent feeling of discomfort or inappropriateness concerning your human body” and elaborates: “You are your non-human species trapped in a human body” (Gerbasi et al., p. 216). The study found that 46.3% of those furies who said yes to the questions “Do you consider yourself to be less than 100% human?” and “If you could become 0% human, would you?” were “distorted unattained.” These furies were “distorted” because “they consider themselves to be less than 100% human” and yet they are, to the researchers, “objectively human,” and they are “unattained” because “they are humans and have not reached their goals.” The total number of furies who selected both these items was 31 (out of a possible 209). These 31, of the “distorted unattained” type, were the ones most likely to be diagnosed with the proposed construct of species identity disorder.

This small minority becomes enlarged, however, in the concluding paragraph of the paper where “distorted unattained” becomes “distorted,” thereby including two distinct groups under one heading, as in the following passage:

“[P]arallels between distorted furry dimension and GID criteria are remarkable. Distorted furry types may possibly represent a condition we have tentatively dubbed ‘Species Identity Disorder’” (Gerbası et al., p. 220). Here the diagnosis slips from requiring *both* being “less than 100% human” *and* “being 0% human” to only requiring the first criterion—being “less than 100% human.” The implications of this rhetorical slip are a vast shift in proportion, since it triples the number of furies who are potentially diagnosable as having species identity disorder (from 31 to 99 [or 46%] of the 214 furies who answered).

So what treatments for species identity disorder might be considered, in light of this parallel with gender identity disorder? Gender identity disorder treatment focuses mainly on children and adolescents, with higher referral rates for boys than girls. Treatment for gender identity disorder can include limiting opportunities for cross-dressing, positive reinforcement of the gender of the “body,” and encouraging play with same-sex friends. Might species identity disorder treatment follow a similar pattern, including, perhaps, redirecting a child’s attention away from cross-dressing as an animal, limiting the influence of humanimal creatures like stuffed toys, companion species, Disney characters, and the characters on *Sesame Street*, as well as Arthur, Skippy, the Muppets, Angelina Ballerina, and Olivia? Under this scheme, even the most traditional and normative childhood, articulated alongside and within animality (Melson, 2001), making use of those “animals of the mind” that Berger (1992) describes as endemic to Western culture, may have to be rethought as potentially producing “tranimals.”²

On the other hand, treatments for species identity disorder might involve counseling to learn to tolerate “atypical” humanimal development for those bothered by furies, like Shari Caudron, who says of her own encounters with furies: “I confess that the strangeness of it all bothers me, and it bothers me that it bothers me” (2006, p. 193). Motivated by the sense that children diagnosed with gender identity disorder are “not necessarily disordered, but they surely create disorder in cultural systems of belief,” a Norwegian model called “Queer positive,” developed by E. E. P. Benestad, focuses on “those who are being disturbed; namely parents, siblings, other family members, teachers, fellow pupils, friends and health professionals. These individuals are gathered and offered local seminars on the subjects of gender and sexual orientations. This in order to leave them more at ease with atypical gender development” (2006, p. 48).

If such a “treatment” was available for those concerned by species identity disorder, it might look to, or find inspiration in, the emergent field of animal studies. A number of scholars in that field are rethinking the strategic fiction of the study’s a priori “100% human”—a fiction that renders the “human”

complicit with speciesism and, in Derrida's words, perpetuates the "sin against rigorous thinking that contains all nonhuman species to that *word* 'Animal'" (Derrida, 2002). Cary Wolfe's observation that "the other-than-human resides at the very core of the human itself" (2003, p. 17) could be deployed to "treat" those bothered by the furriness at the border of the human. In other words, the "problem" that the researchers identify might not lie with furies who identify as "less than 100% human"; the problem may lie more broadly in the regulatory fictions around what constitutes the "properly human" subject.

There are a myriad of reasons why furry participants at a furry conference might identify as "less than 100% human," not the least having a hangover from furry drinks the night before. Shari Caudron quotes Mark, a furry, who says: "In so much of society, there are so many layers of bullshit. It's hard to be yourself. But the whole fursona thing is really cool. It strips away human reluctance in many forms" (Caudron, 2006, p. 190). Tigerden.com includes other voices on furry "lifestylers" who reflect critically on being "human."

Significantly, Gerbasi et al. take the trouble to define what they mean by "furies" but not what they mean by "human," and so phrases like "objectively human" and "100% human" remain a priori assumptions. It seems fairly obvious that the two groups (the psychologists and furies) may well have very different ideas about what constitutes the human (and what constitutes a disorder, for that matter). Indeed, these differences may even be incommensurable and are perhaps best illustrated by this comment: "[C]ostumes at times interfered with the researcher knowing for certain a person's sex" (Gerbasi et al., p. 201). Isn't this precisely one of the reasons for the costumes? To deflect the assumption of traditional "human" gender norms? Implicit in the costume's "interference" with what the psychologist needs to know (male or female?) is the assumption that "seeing" a person confirms "his" or "her" gender identity.

Gender identity is far more complex than what a person "objectively" presents as. The researchers' emphasis on what they can see, or not see, of the "real human" beneath the suit also misses a crucial aspect of furry fandom's online territories: a hyperworld, a screen, a virtual suit, and an important capacity to live other kinds of lives as humanimals. While the researchers insist that beneath the suit lies the "real" human, the furry might believe something quite different. As one furry puts it: "See, we aren't pretending to be furry; a furry is what we really are. The human being is what we are stuck with" (Gerbasi, 2008, p. 190). The word "see" refers here to comprehension, rather than visibility as key to reality. The survey misses an opportunity to allow furies to define what they might mean by "human" and by their critique of the human.

In relation to sexuality, the research limits the range of possibilities by asking furries a supposedly open-ended question about their sexuality, but one that has only three possible answers: “heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual” (p. 206). What gets left out of the count is this: “Another 24 participants, 19 of whom were furries, provided answers that could not be categorized as either heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (e.g. ‘pansexual,’ ‘omnisexual,’ ‘bicurious,’ ‘normal,’ ‘any/all,’ and ‘white’)” (Gerbasí et al., p. 206). These uncategorizable answers (especially “pansexual,” “omnisexual,” and “bicurious”) were not included in the summaries, even though the researchers note that “many furries reported non-heterosexual sexual orientations” (Gerbasí et al., p. 219). If they did not use recognizable (and arguably normative) terms like *homosexual*, *heterosexual*, and *bisexual*, they couldn’t be counted. This represents a paradigm problem, a problem of designing a study around normative human sexualities and excluding and pathologizing what is left out. There is potential for furries to be more than merely on the wrong side of “100% human,” whatever that means. Indeed, the gaps in the data in this study reveal some missed opportunities to think about furry fandom in terms of the paradigm shift that it might represent.

Notes

1. G. A. Rekers is the author of a number of polemical books designed to help parents avoid rearing homosexual children. As an advocate for the Family Research Council, a family advocacy group, he is known for his antigay lobbying. He is more recently known for being outed by *The New York Times* in May 2010.

2. This is a term used by Akhila in her discussion of gender and animality. Retrieved June 2010 from <http://akhila.feralscribes.org/essays/trans.php>.

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