

screwing the pooch: legitimizing accounts in a zoophilia on-line community

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This article seeks to extend existing research that addresses how deviant individuals use Internet technology to communicate accounts that neutralize hostile labels associated with their behaviors. Data were collected from a message board dedicated to zoophilia; the sample was comprised of 4,983 individual posts drawn from 87 discussion threads. Findings suggest that the posters routinely justify their actions through the production of neutralizing accounts. In particular, three new types of accounts were documented: appeals to enlightenment, claims of cultural diffusion, and neutralization by comparison.

The Internet has a dark underbelly where the “nuts, sluts, and perverts” of society lurk in virtual anonymity at all hours of the day (Liazos 1972). In part because cyberspace is a largely unregulated domain, many have come to perceive

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the Internet as a “lawless...realm of subversive forces” (Sandywell 2006:48); perhaps the most ominous example is the pedophile male who poses on-line as a teenager in hopes of seducing young children. These faceless predators and the availability on-line of illicit content are popularized in media accounts—most notably the undercover sting operations depicted on *To Catch a Predator*—which often present a rhetoric of fear and vulnerability to audiences. Yet these cyber-deviants are not simply oddities to be sensationalized; they participate with increasing frequency in relatively anonymous on-line communities where social realities are negotiated through the production of legitimizing accounts (Jenkins 2001).

This article examines the techniques used by posters on a zoophilia message board to interpret, manage, and neutralize hostile labels directed by larger society toward animal sex. In recent years, many deviants have turned to the Internet to establish on-line communities where they can “discuss their problems in a sympathetic and non-censorious environment that may be lacking in their everyday lives” (Ferreday 2003:284). The sense of privacy offered by Internet communication theoretically reduces both social risk and fear of stigmatization: “anonymity, disembodiment, outreach and speed are the hallmarks of Internet communication and, combined, they make us feel daring, liberated, infallible” (Jewkes and Sharp 2003:2). This seems particularly beneficial for individuals who engage in extreme forms of deviance, and whose “behavior, beliefs, or physical traits that are so far outside the norm, so unacceptable to a wide range of different audiences, that they elicit *extremely* strong negative reactions” (Goode 2008:xi; emphasis in original). Of course, virtual communities also exist among socially accepted groups, including collectors and traders of live music (Nieckarz 2005), fan groups (Clerc 2000; Darling-Wolf 2004), and on-line gamers (Brignall and Van Valey 2008). However, it is important to understand the growing association of extreme deviant subgroups in cyberspace because many of these social networks did not exist prior to the Internet (Adler and Adler 2006).

Indeed, the importance of on-line communication cannot be understated: we may expect individuals who interact in cyber-communities to reinforce their loyalties to the group

through ritualized social interactions in much the same way as occurs in the off-line world (Collins 1975). In effect, the ability to interact in relative anonymity with likeminded others allows fellow deviants to become "cyber colleagues" and has helped facilitate the emergence of on-line subcultures (Adler and Adler 2006, 2008; Holt 2007; Jenkins 2001; Quayle and Taylor 2002). Internet communities have emerged as particularly important sanctuaries for those who participate in extreme sexual deviance, like zoophilia, that "are so objectively deviant from the standpoint of the numbers involved in them that the likelihood of a subculture developing in physical space is nearly nil" (Jenkins and Thomas 2004:5, see also Durkin et al. 2006; Jenkins 2001). Because extreme forms of deviance are generally performed in seclusion, participants often lack the support and kinship of a traditionally defined subculture (Durkin et al. 2006); they tend to become increasingly withdrawn and enter into a "self-imposed segregation" (Tierney 2008:340). The resulting sense of social exclusion prompts many to seek validation in cyberspace from sympathetic colleagues capable of providing much needed support, reassurance, and guidance (Adler and Adler 2006, 2008; Durkin 2004; Durkin et al. 2006).¹

For these individuals, on-line communities may indeed have a therapeutic effect. To the extent that participants believe they are receiving positive emotional support and self-validation, they may obtain a sense of camaraderie and normalcy simply unavailable in the off-line world (Adler and Adler 2006; Hurley et al. 2007; Tierney 2008; Wilson et al. 2006). However, these potentially positive effects are often immediate in nature; on-line communities tend to reinforce and strengthen existing behavioral patterns over time among active participants (Adler and Adler 2006; Quayle and Taylor 2002; Rodham et al. 2007). We may expect that the simultaneously public-yet-(semi)private nature of the Internet plays a fundamental role in emboldening

¹Posters who vent their frustrations to a caring audience may obtain a greater sense of their own self-worth (Rodham et al. 2007); although, Tierney (2008) notes that on-line communities often "exacerbate existing feelings of loneliness, despondency, and despair" should user posted questions of issues be ignored by others (p. 341).

attitudes that favor continued deviance, since perceptions of anonymity in cyberspace allow deviants to safely manage their discreditable identities and promote their own self-interests (see Adler and Adler 2006). Often this is accomplished through the distribution of accounts designed to legitimate shared behaviors and neutralize deviance (Scott and Lyman 1968).

Among zoophiles, accounts describing personal experiences function as a mechanism to help insulate individuals who engage in bestiossexual activities from hostile outsiders by distancing themselves from the dominant social definition of zoophilia as deviant. To accomplish this, posters construct alternative dialogues that contradict, or altogether denounce, popular conceptions of zoophilia as being cruel, abusive, and an altogether bizarre sexual preference. In doing so, they attempt to re-frame the issue of zoophilia by cultivating a discourse of resistance that neutralizes the deviance associated with animal sex. As such, the analysis of accounts presented by zoophiles in on-line settings will not only advance our understanding of zoophilia and animal sex more generally, but also provide meaningful insight into the shared beliefs that zoophiles believe justify their sexual relationships with non-human species (Durkin and Bryant 1999, see also the analysis of justifications for pedophilia in Abel et al. 1984).

LEGITIMIZING ACCOUNTS AS A FRAMING MECHANISM

Internet technology provides an invaluable resource for otherwise isolated individuals who engage in extreme forms of deviance and lack a mechanism for social support in the off-line world to express aspects of their personality that remain otherwise concealed in day-to-day interactions. This liberating effect, which emanates from the veil of anonymity that shrouds on-line communication, encourages some people to make statements aimed at defusing the deviance associated with their stigmatizing behaviors (Jewkes and Sharp 2003). These *accounts* are “socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question” (Scott and Lyman 1968:51); they “serve as explanatory mechanisms for deviance...a type of impression management technique

that protects the social identity of the deviant in the face of potential societal disavowment" (Durkin and Bryant 1999:107). Essentially, accounts mitigate deviant actors' culpability by neutralizing the guilt or shame associated with their behaviors, thereby absolving them of wrongdoing (Scott and Lyman 1968).

In terms of the present research, the accounts presented on-line by zoophiles fall entirely under the classification of *justifications*, which occur when an individual accepts responsibility for an act, but denies that any deprecatory qualities were associated with it (Scott and Lyman 1968). While generally defined as legitimate rationalizations by the posters themselves and other members of the zoophile community, these justifications, are rebuked as invalid by larger society (see Sykes and Matza 1957). Nonetheless, they function to neutralize the deviance attached to animal sex by presenting those behaviors as "moral or, at the very least, not as aberrant as it is typically considered" (Durkin and Bryant 1999:108). In this instance, justifications constructed by zoophiles are not unlike those produced by pedophiles that claim their consensual sexual relations with children are moral undertakings that benefit the child (Jenkins 2001). There are several recognized types of justifications: denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, appeal to loyalties, the sad tale, claims to self-fulfillment, and basking in the reflected glory of related others (Durkin and Bryant 1999; Scott and Lyman 1968).²

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected between September and November of 2008, from an Internet discussion board dedicated to zoophilia. The decision to use zoophilia as a case study was based on its similarity to prior research of on-line communities dedicated to child pornography (Jenkins 2001)

²Scott and Lyman (1968) note that justifications extend our understanding of techniques of neutralization because they apply to all prospective deviants: "techniques [of neutralization] have been discussed with respect to accounts offered by juvenile delinquents for untoward action, their wider use has yet to be explored" (p. 51).

and pedophilia (Durkin 1997; Durkin and Bryant 1999) that indicates the production of accounts among other sexual deviants. A list of potentially relevant sites was initially obtained by running keyword searches using the Google, Yahoo, and AOL search engines; each hit was then examined for suitability until an appropriate website containing an interactive asynchronous forum (e.g., message board) was selected.³ Sites were excluded if they were run or monitored by health professionals, were inactive or rarely used, had low membership, and were private or closed sites that required registration with an administrator (see Rodham et al. 2007:423).

A zoophilia forum, which will be referred to by the pseudonym Zoo Board, was ultimately chosen from a site with membership in excess of 550,000 users.⁴ The decision to use Zoo Board was predicated by three factors: (1) message threads were regularly created and updated, indicating that members are actively involved in the Zoo Board community; (2) the vast membership on Zoo Board meant that a large number of users could potentially post or respond to posted accounts at any given time; and (3) the archival capacity of the message board allows for the cultivation of accounts over an extended period of time.

The final research sample was comprised of 87 discussion threads containing 4983 individual posts, which dated back as far as March 4, 2004.⁵ During periods of data collection, messages posted on-line, along with all replies, were copied into a Microsoft Word file using the print screen function and placed in chronological order for later analysis. An initial examination of each archived board posting was then

³Asynchronous forums allow posted messages to be archived and accessed by readers at a later point in time (Ward 2007). Although real-time forums (e.g., chat room) were also considered, it was determined that the archival capacity of discussion boards make them more suitable for studying the development of claims because they allow for the analysis of responses to original posted claims over time.

⁴It is unclear exactly how many of the approximately 550,000 members actively communicate using the zoophilia forum because the selected site also contains forums dedicated to the active trade of animal sex movies and pictures, global personal ads, homemade artwork, user submitted stories, zoophilia fantasies, and an on-line shop where members can purchase full-length animal DVDs.

⁵All discussion threads that did not contain accounts as determined by the researcher, or did not include one written entry posted during the sampling period were excluded from the final sample.

conducted in order to compile a preliminary list of discussion themes and any dominant account frames. A second round of coding was then performed in order to collapse redundant or overlapping frames. Finally, the accuracy of each frame was verified by again reading each post in the data sample. Upon completion of all stages of data analysis, discussion board postings were periodically examined to further ensure that reported findings accurately represented the discourse on the selected zoophilia discussion board.

Ethical Considerations

There are ethical concerns related to the study of zoophilia on-line communities. The issues being discussed are quite often very private in nature, which raises important issues related to the expectation of privacy in on-line communication and the need to obtain informed consent (Hurley et al. 2007). In order to address this concern, data were collected solely from a public Internet forum that did not require users to complete an on-line registration, demand the use of a password to enter the site, or obtain clearance from a site administrator in order to access a chat room or discussion board.⁶ While it is reasonable for members of "restricted access" sites to believe that their conversations are taking place in a private or closed domain, individuals communicating on open discussion boards have no reasonable expectation of privacy given that those forums are freely accessible to the general public (Hurley et al. 2007). Despite this, measures were taken to protect the anonymity of individual discussants on these sites: specific details of the website used in this research are purposely withheld and identified only by pseudonym. All comments posted on Zoo Board and reproduced in the study, however, are presented verbatim.

Limitations

The data obtained for this article are designed to provide insight into the production of legitimizing accounts in one zoophilia on-line community. Any findings therein cannot

⁶While no registration was required to access the site and read user postings, a free registration process involving the acquisition of a site membership with a unique username and password was required to submit postings and contribute to discussion threads.

necessarily be generalized to the larger zoophile population; they simply reflect the researcher's interpretation of accounts produced among individuals who actively post commentary on Zoo Board. Additionally, it is difficult to surmise about group processes or the actual motives of individual members of Zoo Board and the zoophile community as a whole using content obtained from message boards. Postings are akin to secondary data collected from anonymous respondents whose actual identities remain unknown. Despite these concerns, analysis of accounts produced in cyberspace may provide important insight into the ways that zoophiles manage their stigma in an on-line environment where they can acknowledge their deviance without fear of retribution.⁷

LEGITIMIZING ACCOUNTS IN A ZOOPHILIA ON-LINE COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF ZOO BOARD

The existence of bestiality and zoophilia has been traced back to prehistoric times: cave paintings dating back as far as 40,000 years depict sexual contact between humans and non-human species (Beetz 2004; Miletski 2006; Peretti and Rowan 1982; Rosenberger 1968; Wilcox et al. 2005). In modern society, sexual behaviors like bestiality/zoophilia, necrophilia, transvestism, sadomasochism, and homosexuality have traditionally been viewed, to varying degrees, as disturbing, unnatural, immoral, and otherwise considered taboo (at least publicly) by a large portion of the population (Davies 1982). While some of these taboos have fallen, zoophilia remains largely unaccepted and the subject of intense stigma: "all known societies have likely applied some form of censure to human-animal sexual relations" (Beirne 1997:320).⁸ In the United States, the majority of jurisdictions have enacted statutes that prohibit sexual contact with non-human species. Additionally, the sodomy law under the military code (10 USCA § 925, 10 USCA § 925) establishes on the federal level that "[a]ny person...who engages in unnatural carnal copulation with...an animal is guilty of sodomy" (Wisch 2008).

⁷For a similar discussion on the limitations of secondary data in on-line research of pedophiles, see Durkin and Bryant (1999).

⁸Beirne (1997) defines bestiality as inter-species sexual assault.

Despite being viewed as a “disturbing sexual practice” by most people (Beirne 2001:43), it is nonetheless unclear how prevalent bestiality and zoophilia are in society. According to Kinsey et al. (1948), up to 50% of all males raised in rural areas in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries had at least one sexual experience with animals; yet it was also found that fewer than 10% of all males and approximately 4% of females reported similar encounters with other species (Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953). More recently, Hunt (1974) reported prevalence rates for bestiality as being 4.9% for men and 1.9% for women (see also, Miletski 2001). While these data provide a baseline for analysis, the extent to which sex with animals might be more widespread is difficult to determine because individuals who fear being stigmatized, or even prosecuted depending on their location, are apt to conceal their bestiosexual tendencies. Additionally, whereas each of the discussed studies use the terminology of bestiality, or sexual contact with animals done for immediate gratification void of any emotional attachment to the animal (Beetz 2004; Matthews 1994; Miletski 2001; Wilcox et al. 2005), perhaps less is known about the causes, rationales, and pervasiveness of zoophilia.

A growing body of clinical research defines zoophilia as the “sexual desire for, emotional attachment to, and love for animals,” which often becomes crystallized through the choosing of a “partner” with whom a deep relationship is formed (Wilcox et al. 2005:307). In fact, Beirne (2001) notes that zoophilia “comprises a broader category of actions than the restricted notion of sexual intercourse” (p. 49). Classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition) as a paraphilia (American Psychiatric Association 1994), the American Psychiatric Association has determined that “zoophilia is virtually never a clinically significant problem by itself” (American Psychiatric Association 1987:405). Nonetheless, the taboo associated with animal sex leaves most zoophiles fearful of possible stigmatization. Consequently, they tend to perform those actions in solitude or, at the very most, in the company of small, intimate groups. While zoophilia may not exist as form of deviance performed strictly by loners, it may nonetheless be a socially isolating activity.

To this end, a user poll posted on Zoo Board indicated that the vast majority of respondents feared being exposed for having sex with animals. Of the approximately 30% who specified that they would like to be caught, many qualified their response by noting they would only like their secret to be discovered by an intimate partner who was open to the idea of zoophilia. This suggests that there is an inherently solitary nature to animal sex: "a life of secrecy and fear, which dominates many zoophiles, may lead to isolation, anxiety, depression, and even suicide attempts" (Miletski 2001:88). Still, it would be inaccurate to suggest that zoophiles have no capacity to network socially. The Internet has allowed for the development of on-line forums that allow zoophiles to communicate with other animal sex aficionados from around the world. Because users are only identified by their handle, avatar, and whatever personal information they choose to disclose, all interactions and file sharing (photo and video) are conducted in relative anonymity.⁹

Account Production on Zoo Board

For zoophiles, forming sustainable communities in off-line space would be virtually impossible due to the extreme nature of their deviance; they consequently maintain little authority over how the general public comes to identify their shared behaviors. Within the virtual confines of Zoo Board, however, zoophiles produce alternative dialogues that challenge or altogether rebuke the legitimacy of the deviant labels applied to them by the larger society. This process of re-framing is accomplished largely through the dissemination of legitimizing accounts that serve as justifications, which are fashioned according to several primary themes: denial of injury, justification by comparison, claims of benefit, and condemning of condemners. Additionally, three new types of accounts have been identified: appeals to enlightenment, neutralization by comparison, and claims of cultural diffusion.

⁹An avatar is a visual representation of an Internet user most commonly used alongside a username.

Denial of Injury

Denial of injury involves an assertion by the deviant that his or her actions are permissible because they did not produce sufficient harm to cause injury to the alleged victim (Scott and Lyman 1968). Posters on Zoo Board perceive animals as capable of providing consent, thereby casting themselves in direct opposition to those who argue that their actions harm the welfare of animals: "I assume everyone here knows that animals *can* consent, quite obviously, but that little bit of misinformation is the basis for making bestiality illegal in most places that it is" (emphasis in original).

Here the poster challenges mainstream social perceptions of bestiosexual contact as harmful by asserting that animals are willing participants capable of consenting to human sexual advances.

Levy (2003) notes that the issue of consent is often predicated on the perception that an animal's behavior cannot indicate a willingness to consent: "If animals are capable of initiating sexual contact with human beings, then presumably they are capable of giving consent" (p. 446). On Zoo Board, posters use this notion of consent to contradict claims that zoophiles should be condemned for acting against the will of an animal that is unable to approve of their sexual advances.

I think a lot of people who have never seen an animal "ask for sex" (and most of us here know, they can and WILL, sometimes very insistently!) assume that we're performing selfish acts against the animals' will . . . non-zoos tend to just associate the fact that bestiality is more or less entirely illegal with the assumption that it must horribly hurt the animal, such is life, i'm afraid.

Through this implicit assumption that animals can assign consent through their instinctual need for sex, members of Zoo Board attempt to dismiss their own deviance by denying injury to their *partners*.¹⁰ As one poster noted, "animals do what they want, if you let them."

¹⁰In one instance, a poster even argued that injury is most likely to be inflicted on the zoophile and not the animal: "Because horses are a lot bigger than humans, is it wrong to say that having sex with a horny one is 'abusing.' [In fact], if you really want a correct 'abusive' scenario, the horses would be considered to be abusing us."

Justification by Comparison (Distancing)

Justification by comparison occurs when individuals attempt to neutralize their deviance by comparing their actions to more serious crimes. While these individuals may not be “committed to conventional norms, they are nonetheless attempting to maintain their sense of self-worth by arguing that they could be worse or are not as bad as some others” (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:546). Posters on Zoo Board attempt to accomplish this by constructing an ethical distinction between their behaviors and other forms of deviance that the general public tends to correlate with zoophilia, such as child molestation and rape.

I like the way the [media] blatantly link bestiality with pedophilia. I guess what we do is sorta like marajuana, ours is a “gateway” type of sexuality.

People like to think that zoophilia is a step away from necrophilia, pedophilia, and so on when it's in no way related.

The [view] of most people is that we are no better than pedophiles and rapist they refuse to see that we are differant if you were to try a campain to get it legalized and have rights you would indeed be faced with a lot of negativity and perci-cution and subject to hate crime type stuff so as for now i think we should just keep a low profile and keep it behind locked doors.

Posters tend to point to two factors in explaining this association. First, larger society perceives animals as being incapable of consenting to sexual contact. Second, sex with non-human species is viewed as unnatural because it cannot be classified according to one of the two existing sexual roles: heterosexuality and homosexuality.¹¹

¹¹In referencing this point, one poster noted that “zoosexuality isn't a real sexuality, and this is the route of the confusion. There [are] only two sexual roles, hence two sexualities, homosexuality and heterosexuality If you like canines, you are canine specific—there are many species, so you can have an array of many specifications. If you like let's say female humans and male dogs, you are [not] bisexual, but ‘polysexual’ more precisely. ‘Polysexuality’ simply means that you only like certain genders for certain activities/types of sexual entities (i.e., species/objects/ages) . . . you vary between specifications, so you are polysexual.”

Because their partner can consent while ours cannot and we are just raping and abusing them. And that we are no better than pedos and such because we are preying on innocent creatures no higher than a child. I know that's BS, you know that's BS, and many people here know that's BS. But we also know that unfortunately there are people who actually do that crap, which is why people think this way about all of us.

Additionally, posters sometimes distance their own behaviors from other bestiosexual activities that place the welfare of the animal at risk. For example, anyone advocating "fence hopping," or having sex with someone else's animal without their consent, or "hot swapping," where a number of people all have sex with the same animal during a short period of time, are likely to be vilified by members of Zoo Board.

I think having animals brought to a party just for sex is [shit], it doesn't care if the animal is willing...if she says no, it means no, anyone breaking that rule gets the boot (and some other things).

The mention of any activity even approaching sex before [the animal reaches] puberty can get you banned...don't even go there.

In effect, claims that distance zoophilia from other behaviors that posters find more egregious draw a clear delineation between zoophiles and those who they believe to be actual deviants. To paraphrase Cromwell and Thurman (2003), the gist of the argument is that "you may think I am bad, but there are others who are a lot worse."

Claims of Benefit

Posters make claims of benefit when they assert that the alleged victim was not harmed because their actions were in fact beneficial for all involved parties (Durkin and Bryant 1999). On Zoo Board, posts sometimes convey a philanthropic message, suggesting that zoophiles provide animals with necessary relief by meeting their sexual needs.

We are all animals at some level, with about the same wants and desires. Your fuzzy friend loves getting his rocks off or her world rocked just as much as you do! This is pretty

evident to us, but think about it: very few animals are intelligent enough to have sex for fun! I like to think dogs (maybe horses) are among them most of the time. The drive for sex is seen in all living things So, in ending, don't forget to hug your little buddy every now and then, and also be sure to give him/her a little something special from time to time.

In addition to implying that it is cruel and abusive "to make a horny pet suffer," posters also described their pets' reactions to having their sexual frustrations relieved in order to validate the benefit of their actions.

The other day, our spayed basset hound was rather frustrated from horniness. She rarely does this, but happened to be horny for some reason at the time. Being so kind and loving to his pet, JP stopped what he was doing, giving a little of his time to help her with her needs. Was it abusive to help a frustrated dog get rid of sexual tension by fingering her? No, of course not. The big dopey smile on that dog's face as she lay in her bed after getting off was proof enough. And that constantly wagging tail? Yeah, tell me she was being abused . . . it saddens me that so many pet owners would not have bothered to help their pet out with that need because of fear of what society might think.

By establishing that they are satisfying mutually desired sexual needs, posters attempt to exonerate their actions by portraying zoophilia as a mutual act of love and compassion. Hence, zoophilia is constructed as being not only beneficial for the human, but to the animal as well.

Condemning of Condemners

Condemning of condemners occurs when posters make claims that their accusers are unfit to judge zoophiles because they engage in acts that are just as bad, if not worse, than animal sex (see Scott and Lyman 1968). Posters underpin these claims by denouncing conventional society as hypocritical for demonizing zoophilia. Some claimants argue that normals tend to callously abuse the very animals they allegedly seek to protect.

A neighbor of mine crates their dog (puppy), all day in their backyard. Totally neglects the dog. I called animal control as the weather is getting cold. Makes me sad that this happens all the time, everywhere. My amazing dog goes everywhere with me. I couldn't imagine leaving her in the yard in a 3 × 3 crate with less than 1 hr of human contact a day. [What The Fuck!!!] Some people need to be treated how they treat their pets. Nothing pisses me off like animal/pet neglect. WE chose them, not the other way around.

By establishing that a fundamental difference exists between zoophiles and "normals" that mistreat animals, posters are simultaneously shifting the blame to their critics, while furthering their position that zoophiles are, in fact, upstanding members of society.

Redirecting charges back on those who should unfairly brand them as abnormal and cruel allows members of Zoo Board to draw attention to what the group considers to be societal hypocrisies. For example, some posters claim that the general public vilifies them, even though similar actions are considered acceptable when involved in animal husbandry: "You can manually [sic] masterbate [sic] boars, put a large electric dildo up a bulls [sic] ass and so on as long as it is not about personal enjoyment but about business."

In casting their accusers as hypocrites, some posters of Zoo Board engage in a process of *retrenchment*, wherein they refuse their deviant label altogether, redirecting it instead back onto otherwise respectable members of mainstream society who they perceive as harming animals.

I...oppose the Bob Barker approach to animal care. Spaying, neutering, and castrating is Sexual Mutilation, just as much as circumcision (male or female) among humans is. It is abnormal and totally unnecessary. It goes on, mostly "for the money" by humane shelters/pet adoption centers... it serves no purpose.... Money and greed drive the Powers That Be. They pay for the commercials that advance their particular agenda, no matter how inhumane and unnatural the procedure is. The Vets, Doctors, and hospitals rake in the cash as any "good business" should.

Here, the poster has attempted to shift the deviant label to those in society who express support for, or actively engage

in, unnecessary cruelty against animals. In some cases, groups like the Humane Society of America are cast as “animal ‘rights’ extremists,” while zoophiles are presented as victims, demonized for opposing what they believe to be an inhumane agenda perpetuated against non-human species. By condemning their condemners in this way, posters on Zoo Board ultimately attempt to neutralize their own deviance by framing accepted social practices as being more harmful to animals than zoophilia.

Appeals to Enlightenment

Appeals to enlightenment involve posters justifying their deviance by contending that certain behaviors are vilified because larger society is incapable of comprehending the appropriateness of those actions.

Many people who don't have odd sexual tastes (i.e., the “normal” people) have a tendency to throw everyone who has any sexual preference into the same pool. If you're into beast, you **MUST** be into [CENSOR]. If you're into [CENSOR], you must be homosexual. It's a matter of ignorance. They view all of these practices as filthy, taboo, indecent, etc. and therefore think that anyone who does one of these must do all of them, because they're just a “bad” person for liking the things they like This is what we call a generalization. You're grouping together things that don't need to be, or warrant being, grouped together It's an approach taken by people who are too ignorant to see the truth—that every individual is just that, individual, and you can't treat anyone as part of a group because we're not all clones of one another.

By contrast, posters on Zoo Board cast themselves as progressive on animal issues, proclaiming that their beliefs represent a higher consciousness toward the co-existence of humans and other animal species.

You will run into . . . objections such as: it's against the law; it's against religion; it's perverted; and it's dirty. All of these issues are artificial and belie a fundamental problem with modern society. We as a nation, as a world, exploit animals for everything from food to companionship. Giving animals . . . or admitting that animals are capable of being in mutual loving

relationships puts that world view into serious question. People are dogmatically trained to their very core to reject the notion that it's okay to have sex with animals. It's something you just have to be prepared to deal with out there in the great big world of mundanes.

The notion that zoophilia is misunderstood was posited by posters with relative frequency, some of whom expressed fear that the "non-tolerance of so-called 'Normal' people" results in the persecution of zoophiles.

In many areas, even if they don't have explicit laws prohibiting zoophilia, the local prosecutors feel they can apply animal cruelty laws, sodomy laws, or other laws to persecute zoos. What people don't understand, they tend to fear and hate, unfortunately. *sighs*

In effect, posters on Zoo Board regularly portray themselves as misunderstood outcasts whose actions are demonized because, as one poster noted, "humans who oppose [zoophilia] lack the mental capacity for it."

Neutralization by Comparison

Claimants engage in neutralization by comparison when they identify similarities between their own plight and other social groups that have overcome a corresponding deviant identity. Although similar in intent to *justification by comparison* (Cromwell and Thurman 2003), individuals are not "justifying their actions by comparing their crimes to more serious offenses" (p. 546), but rather neutralizing their deviance via comparison to other historically stigmatized acts and behaviors that have achieved some level of mainstream social acceptance. Numerous discussion threads focused on the possibility of zoophile advocacy as a means of disseminating "positive publicity" about zoophilia and promoting equality in ways similar to gay rights movement.

For years, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexual/transgender people have been fighting a long hard battle for their rights of equality and for the freedom to express their own individual sexuality without the fear of legal prosecution. Personally, I don't see why practicing zoophiles such as myself

and other people here and around the world, [shouldn't] campaign for the right to legally express our own sexuality too.... If we, and those of us around the world, stuck together, we could have one hell of a campaign.

The correlation to homosexuality is of specific importance for underpinning some zoophiles' desire for equal rights because such comparisons allow posters to define zoophilia as a sexual orientation or lifestyle.¹²

Of course, posters on Zoo Board acknowledge that there continue to be social stigmas associated with homosexuality; the importance, rather, is that public attention drawn to the gay rights movement contributed over time to changing public perceptions, more individuals identifying themselves as homosexual, and a greater degree of mainstream social acceptance.

In the not too distant past the comedians were lambasting gays and lesbians—yet just last night on Jay Leno he had Morgan Freeman as a guest. Morgan was wearing earrings in his right ear, not none in his left. And he indicated that he and his “partner” were going to take a trip to Africa to promote his new film. Until last night I was completely unaware that Morgan Freeman was gay, that does not in the least hinder my utmost respect for him and his superb acting, he is one of my favorites. And Ellen DeGeneres, she is my favorite female comedian. And just last week NBC interviewed an actress who is very famous and just recently “came out of the closet.” Several states have now legalized same sex marriage. I realize gays and lesbians have a long ways to go to gain full acceptance but it is much better now than just a few years ago. With hope and time maybe, just maybe, zoophiles will be able to “come out of our closets” and join the “mainstream” community with our own love of our beastly friends and lovers.

By drawing comparisons to the gay rights movement, posters attempt to neutralize the deviance associated with

¹²Some posters do point out that comparisons to the gay rights movement are troublesome: “[Gay]/Lesbian/Transgender etc is accepted by law now because its done between two humans. Trying to get a law change that involves a sexual relationship with another species is doomed to fail as it's a whole different argument to take to the masses.”

zoophilia by claiming that they are “fighting the same fight” as homosexuals, and that “animal lovers/zoos, are discriminated against, just as [homosexuals] were in earlier years (in the USA).”¹³

Claims of Cultural Diffusion

Claims of cultural diffusion occur when individuals attempt to normalize their deviance by referencing depictions of their acts in popular culture in order to show that there is a greater mainstream acceptance for their behaviors than is acknowledged publicly. This does not necessarily require claimants to presume that “everybody does it” (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:545), but rather that certain deviant acts are more common than people would like to admit. While it is impossible to determine the exact number of people who participate in zoophilia or bestiality, numerous discussion threads were dedicated to the prevalence of zoophilia in mainstream society.

Anything that puts the whole zoo concept more into the mainstream is a good thing . . . it does push it a little more into the public consciousness. And it does seem like more zoo/beasty stuff is popping up in movies and TV lately, usually as jokes on sitcoms and stuff, but still, it puts it out there, exposing people to the idea, making it a bit more familiar. And, slowly, I think the more familiar the idea becomes the more likely it is to become gradually more accepted.

To validate this point, posters compiled extensive lists of references to animal sex in film, television, music, publications, and video games.¹⁴ In one thread, posters amassed over 200 supposed mentions of zoophilia over an 11-month

¹³It is worth noting that many posters were quick to point out that members of the homosexual community are hostile to being associated with zoophilia and bestiality. As one poster wrote: “They say that them being gay is biological, that they didn’t choose this, while thinking that we do this because we can, and that no one could ever feel the way they do about another man/woman with a dog/horse/etc. Because their partner can consent while ours cannot and we are just raping and abusing them.”

¹⁴In some cases, members list the names of films, songs, and so forth, which *they* personally associate with zoophilia, even though they acknowledge that there is no explicit reference to animal sex.

span, including references to Tom Hanks' character in the movie *Splash* falling in love with a mermaid, and *King Kong* depicting a "classic case of zoophilia." Although the connection to zoophilia was often questionable—one user, for example, identified the Jimi Hendrix lyric "move over rover, let Jimi take over" as a reference to bestiality—they nonetheless speak to attempts at normalizing animal sex within mainstream society. As one poster noted, "I love seeing zoo in everyday life.... Seems I run across it all the time it reminds me of how you can take the animal out of the human...but you cant [sic] take the human out of the animal."

In particular, efforts were occasionally made to identify public figures suspected to have experimented with zoophilia. For example, one user posted that Madonna has engaged in animal sex, and a lengthy discussion developed over speculation that Sarah Silverman is a secret zoophile.

I personally am not sure if [Silverman] is doing it for the humor, or if she is into it. It DOES seem a little suspicious, however, that there are so many references to it in her show. I would LOVE to be a fly on the wall at her house, though! Also, you never know, she could actually be a member of this community already!

While some were skeptical, believing that Silverman incorporates animal sex references into her comedy simply for shock value, others were more optimistic, claiming that she and other high-profile celebrities have probably experimented with animal sex. Either way, discussions focusing on mainstream cultural references of zoophilia neutralizes the deviance associated with animal sex by reinforcing the idea that zoophilia is not a deviant social activity per se, but rather a normalized behavior that individuals keep hidden due to existing social definitions that label it as deviant.

CONCLUSION

Sociological theory has traditionally addressed how deviants manage their identity and protect themselves from possible stigmatization during day-to-day, real world interactions with normals. The Internet, however, forces us to consider

the liberating effect of on-line communities, which allow individuals to associate in virtual anonymity. Although this communication often takes place in public forums, which can be freely accessed by anyone with an Internet connection, the supportive nature of the community and the relative anonymity afforded to members who post on-line fosters a level of openness that would not otherwise occur in a face-to-face setting.¹⁵ This empowerment has allowed deviants who were once isolated to make proclamations in defense of their behaviors that would be otherwise perilous, if not impossible, to disclose in the off-line world. These legitimizing accounts are routinely produced on Zoo Board as a way of neutralizing the hostile labels associated with animal sex by larger society.

Similar to the findings of Cromwell and Thurman (2003) in their study of shoplifters, posters did not generally use neutralizations as a means of pacifying their own guilt, but rather as a mechanism to justify their actions. This was accomplished in part by shunning mainstream expectations of what constitutes "normal" and by cultivating dialogues of resistance against the dominant social discourse pertaining to animal sex. Of note is that some of the posters who produced these accounts identified themselves as zoophiles, but acknowledged openly that they had never had any sexual contact with non-human animals. While it is impossible to determine empirically whether these claims were truthful using secondary data like message board postings, it does indicate the possibility of pre-event neutralizations (Cromwell and Thurman 2003:547): individuals who have not physically engaged in an act of bestiality but nonetheless post accounts on Zoo Board that neutralize the deviance associated with zoophilia have presumably done so prior to participating in the very activity that stigmatizes zoophilia as a form of extreme deviance. However, given that void of sexual contact, zoophilia still involves the "*sexual desire for ... animals*" (Wilcox et al. 2005:307; emphasis added), it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine when the deviant

¹⁵Many public forums allow Internet users to freely lurk, or anonymously view postings contained on the site, but require a membership in the form of a username and password in order to post on the site.

event begins in the mind of any self-proclaimed zoophile. In other words, individuals can presumably make postevent rationalizations in response to their deviant feelings (e.g., sexual desire for animals) even before they have actually engaged in the physical act of bestiality itself.

Although further research is needed to fully assess the motivations of zoophiles in on-line settings, this study appears to validate Hirschi's (1969) finding that post-facto rationalizations of illicit acts serve to preemptively neutralize the deviance associated with future participation in those actions. Of course, we must consider the possibility that members do not define their actions as deviant within the social context of the Zoo Board community despite the intense social stigma associated with zoophilia. To the extent that posters' accounts are designed to promote the furtherance of the group's shared activities, it is theoretically possible that they are contributing to the foundation of a social movement. We may safely speculate that larger society will not become receptive to zoophilia at any point in the near future. However, the emerging community on Zoo Board and the legitimizing accounts produced therein may nonetheless be cultivating "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani 2003:301).

Indeed, Collins (1981) notes that transformations to the social structure are produced from aggregate changes resulting from "increases in generalized culture due to new communications media or specialized culture-producing activities; new 'technologies' of emotional production; and new particularized cultures (individual reputations) due to dramatic, usually conflictual events" (p. 984). Cyberspace seemingly represents the most feasible mobilization space for extreme deviants, given that intense negative social reactions to their behaviors renders off-line interactions unlikely, if not impossible. In many ways, this reflects the fact that on-line communities provide a forum for the production of interaction ritual chains "in which conversations create symbols of group membership" (Collins 1981:984). Zoo Board members, whose understandings of their own actions (or deviance) are inevitably influenced by the emotional and cultural capital accrued from previous interactions, are likely

motivated to continue posting on the message board, in part, because the benefits they receive and reciprocate onto others are valued "emblems of continuing their common membership" (Collins 1981:1006). On-line communities may therefore help insulate otherwise isolated zoophiles from both the hostility of the everyday world and stigmatizing deviant labels that are received via intersecting interaction ritual chains with normals.

On Zoo Board, accounts are regularly disseminated that normalize zoophilia by constructing alternative dialogues that challenge the mainstream social discourse that defines animal sex as deviant. To this end, the messages and themes contained in neutralizing accounts reveal much about the social organization of the Zoo Board community, and the individual and collective identity work that takes place therein. Accounts reflect how posters perceive their place in the social order, the tangible physical and emotional benefits of zoophilia for humans and their animal counterparts, the appropriateness of their actions in lieu of their enlightened view of human-animal relations, and the sense of passive defiance against an oppressive and misunderstanding society. Although further research is needed, we may expect account production on Zoo Board to have a stabilizing effect on the group; accounts that neutralize the deviance associated with zoophilia likely serve as an important mechanism for building solidarity, reinforcing a collective sense of community, and insulating users from a hostile society.

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