

# Exploring the Possible Link Between Childhood and Adolescent Bestiality and Interpersonal Violence

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Bestiality is a serious although less frequently occurring form of animal cruelty that may be linked to subsequent aggression against humans. This investigation examines whether a perpetrator's race, childhood residence, education, commission of a personal crime, and the number of personal crimes committed affects acts of bestiality committed during childhood or adolescence among a sample of incarcerated males. The results show that respondents with less education and those who had been convicted of committing crimes against people on one or more occasions were more likely to have had sex with animals during their childhood or adolescence than other respondents in the sample. These findings lend some support to the sexually polymorphous theory that among these perpetrators sex and aggression have become mutually inclusive and that bestiality as a form of animal cruelty may be linked with interpersonal human violence.

**Keywords:** *bestiality; animal cruelty; interpersonal violence*

Sex between humans and animals has occurred since prehistoric times (Peretti & Rowan, 1982). This relatively rare form of contact between humans and animals has been documented in prehistoric cave drawings, ancient Egyptian artifacts, and in the mythology and writings of ancient Greece and Rome. The act of bestiality is also discussed in Biblical works (Peretti & Rowan, 1982). Although bestiality has occurred throughout human

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history, it has not always been viewed the same. In fact, human perceptions of this behavior have varied drastically throughout history and across different cultures. For example, the idea of human–animal sexual interaction was embraced by the mythology of many ancient cultures. The Greeks sensationalized human–animal combinations with their god Pan and through other mythological creatures such as the myrmidons, centaurs, and argonauts. Other cultures similarly celebrated human–animal crosses in their mythology such as the Roman fauns, the Egyptian god Ammon, and the Mesopotamian god Dagon (Lindemans, 2004). Biblical writings of the Old Testament, on the other hand, strictly prohibited any human sexual contact with animals and offered severe penalties (Bailey, 1975).

Attitudes toward liberal sexual practices, including bestiality, shifted drastically during the medieval time period. As law and religion merged, the conservative opinions toward sexual behavior held by religious groups became strictly enforced laws. For example, an early English law, drafted around 1290, required that anyone who was convicted of engaging in bestiality be burned (Bailey, 1975). Between 1400 and 1800, it was common practice in England to also charge the animal in cases of bestiality. Animals were often sentenced to die a torturous death along with the human perpetrator, which was followed by the two being buried together (Ives, 1970). In the American colonies during the 1600s, bestiality, or buggery, was a severely punished crime. For example, a 1642 case of bestiality in Plymouth resulted in a young man's hanging. One year earlier in a similar case, a convicted man was branded on the forehead, severely whipped, and forced to sit at the gallows with a rope around his neck to remind him that he could have been hanged for his offense (Lauria, 1998).

Today, bestiality is still a chargeable offense in many states. Although it is not specifically named as a criminal offense, most state laws prosecute bestiality under animal cruelty statutes (Francione & Charlton, 2002). Similarly, Ascione's (1999) definition of *animal cruelty* recognizes bestiality as a legitimate form of animal abuse. Some of these types of human–animal sexual relations include bodily contact, human genital contact with an animal's mouth, masturbation of the animal, and coitus (Peretti & Rowan, 1982). However, despite society's negative view toward bestiality, it continues to occur, hidden from public view. Overall, the research examining bestiality has been diverse in scope and has examined a number of different factors associated with it among institutionalized and noninstitutionalized respondents and among juveniles and adults. For example, researchers have investigated perpetrators' demographic characteristics, abuse histories, family dynamics, motives for bestiality, and the types of animals involved. Nonetheless, insufficient research

exists that has specifically examined the possible relationship between animal sexual abuse and interpersonal violence. The purpose of the current study is to examine the demographic and criminal characteristics of incarcerated males who reported having engaged in bestiality during their childhood and/or adolescence.

## Literature Review

The few early studies about bestiality focused on its prevalence and the abusers' characteristics (Hunt, 1974; Kinsey, Wardell, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). These studies along with later ones also examined the dynamics of bestiality itself (Alvarez & Freinhar, 1991; Hunt, 1974; Kinsey et al., 1948; Miletski, 1999; Peretti & Rowan, 1982; Sandnabba, Santtila, Nordling, Beetz, & Alison, 2002; Weigand, Schmidt, & Kleiber, 1999). However, the most recent studies have examined bestiality within the context of animal cruelty and interpersonal violence (Flynn, 1999; Merz-Perez & Heide, 2003; Merz-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001; Ressler, Burgess, Hartman, Douglas, & McCormack, 1986). Beirne (1997) defined *bestiality* as "interspecies sexual assault" (p. 317). And in their insightful work on animal cruelty, Merz-Perez and Heide (2003) explained the link between bestiality and interpersonal violence using sexually polymorphous theory that notes the fusing of sexual and aggressive behavior as one.

The studies relevant to the current research have examined the demographic characteristics and dynamics of bestiality associated with interpersonal violence. In their study of 5,300 White adult American males, Kinsey et al. (1948) estimated that 8% of American males had engaged in bestiality with prevalence rates being much higher among rural males than among their urban counterparts. Specifically, they found that between 40% and 50% of adolescent males raised on farms had sexual contact with an animal. Among Hunt's (1974) sample of 932 men, only an estimated 4.9% of American males reported having engaged in bestiality. Later, Miletski (1999) found that among the 82 bestialic males in her sample, only one fifth had lived on farms. Both researchers have suggested that these lower figures reflect the decline in the farm population during the previous decades.

Kinsey et al. (1948) also found that among rural males in their sample, those with a college education had slightly more than double the prevalence of bestiality found among those who completed grade school. However, the frequencies of sexual contact with animals were highest among rural males with lower levels of education. More recently, Miletski (1999) also found that

48% of the men and 45% of the women who had engaged in bestiality had at least a college education or more. However, Flynn (1999) found very low rates of prevalence for sex with animals among his sample of 267 college students. In particular, 2.4% of male and 1.1% of female undergraduate students reported having touched an animal in a sexual manner. Furthermore, 2.4% of the male sample and .6% of the female sample reported having engaged in sex with an animal. Because most of these samples consisted of White males only, few studies have examined the possible relationship between race and bestiality. Thus, residence, education, and race warrant further study as correlates of this form of animal cruelty.

Studies examining the dynamics of human–animal sexual contact suggest that bestialic participants may demonstrate a failure to relate to other humans. Using structured interviews, Peretti and Rowan (1982) examined the motives of 27 men and 24 women who reported habitual engagement in acts of bestiality. Males listed sexual expression as the primary reason for engaging in bestiality (93%), followed by sexual fantasy (81%). Being able to bypass the negotiations for sex with human partners was reported by 74% of the male respondents, and 63% reported engaging in bestiality because it did not require any human interaction. Finally, 59% of the male respondents reported that financial reasons contributed to their engagement in bestiality, and 26% claimed emotional involvement with the animal played an important role. Among females, 88% cited emotional involvement as a reason for engaging in bestiality, and 77% reported doing so because it did not require human interaction. The lack of negotiation before sex was a reason given by 58% of the female respondents followed by desire for sexual expressiveness (46%), sexual fantasy (38%), and financial reasons (21%). Although men's and women's motivations for engaging in bestiality reflect some notable differences, forgoing interaction and/or negotiation with other humans were prevalent motives for both sexes.

More recent studies demonstrate that bestiality may also be associated with psychological disorders, including aggressive tendencies and behaviors toward humans among juvenile and adult populations. Duffield, Hassiotis, and Vizard (1998) found that 7 of their sample of 70 youths sent to a psychiatric center for juvenile sexual offenders had committed bestiality. The youthful bestialic sex offenders demonstrated a disproportionately higher rate of mental disorders relative to the rest of the sample. These juveniles were also more likely to have suffered from neglect or abuse in the home, and bestiality was almost never an isolated paraphilia. As a result, they argued that the presence of bestiality in the sexual history of a juvenile offender should be taken as a warning signal that other sexual paraphilias

may be present and that the individual may be at a heightened risk to sexually abuse another person again (see Lane, 1997).

In a similar study, Fleming, Jory, and Burton (2002) surveyed 381 youthful offenders from three midwestern juvenile institutions. The authors administered a battery of questionnaires designed to inquire about the offender's exposure to sexual abuse and childhood trauma, the juvenile's level of sexual aggression, and the offender's family dynamics. Of the 381 in the sample, 24 reported previous sexual contact with an animal, and 161 reported committing sexual offenses only against humans. The authors noted that 23 of the 24 individuals who reported previous sexual contact with an animal also reported having committed sexual offenses against humans. Each juvenile in the bestiality group was then questioned in further detail concerning the nature of their reported sexual acts. Four juveniles reported having placed their mouth on the genitals of an animal, 14 reported having rubbed their genitals against an animal, 10 reported having penetrated the animal with his penis, 6 reported having penetrated an animal with a finger, and 2 reported having inserted an object into an animal's genitalia.

Analysis of the family dynamics of the study's participants showed that individuals in the bestiality group and the sex offender group indicated a higher incidence of negative family communication than did nonsexual offenders. Furthermore, those individuals in the bestiality group indicated significantly less positive family communication than did individuals from the sex offender group. The bestiality and sex offender groups also indicated significantly lower levels of family attachment and family adaptability than the nonsexual offender group. Significant differences in positive family environment were also found between each group with the bestiality group suffering from the least positive family environment followed by the sex offender group, with the nonsexual offender group indicating the most positive family environment (Fleming et al., 2002). As could be expected, the bestiality and sex offender groups suffered from significantly more emotional neglect, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse than the nonsexual offender group. Members of the bestiality group were found to have suffered significantly more emotional abuse and emotional neglect than the sex offender group, but not more physical or sexual abuse. Finally, the authors found that respondents included in the bestiality group reported significantly higher rates of victimization and offending than the sex offender group and the nonsexual offender group.

Among adults, Alvarez and Freinhar (1991) surveyed 20 staff members, 20 medical in-patients, and 20 psychiatric in-patients at a single psychiatric institution. Based upon their results, they developed an index indicating

overall fantasies and experiences with bestiality for a given group. The bestiality index was significantly higher for male psychiatric patients than for male medical in-patients or male psychiatric staff members. Psychiatric patients were significantly more likely than medical in-patients and psychiatric staff to have engaged in a sexual act with an animal and to have fantasized about sexual contact with an animal.

Other researchers have found that bestiality may be associated with acts of sadomasochism. Among Miletski's (1999) 82 bestialic men, 17% had to some degree reported having sadomasochistic fantasies. Approximately 25% said they either were forced or forced someone else into doing something sexually that either they or their human partner did not want to do. Further research by Sandnabba et al. (2002) investigated bestiality among a sample of sadomasochistic males. Data were collected using a questionnaire that was sent to each member of two known sadomasochistically oriented clubs. Of 186 respondents, 12 reported having engaged in bestiality within the past year. Because of the small bestiality sample size attained, the authors utilized a matched-groups design to investigate significant characteristics of the bestiality group. They found that the bestiality group most often began engaging in sexual acts with animals following the onset of sadomasochistic sexual practices. The bestiality group also reported being significantly more likely to engage in sexual experimentation than the control groups.

Ultimately, then, it is not surprising that bestiality may also be a potentially significant predictor of interpersonal violence. One of the first studies that recognized this potential relationship was conducted by Ressler et al. (1986). Their research examined the characteristics of 12 sexual killers who had been sexually abused during childhood as compared with 16 sexual killers who had not been sexually abused. They found that the sexually abused killers reported higher rates of animal cruelty in general, and higher rates of bestiality specifically. Merz-Perez and Heide (2003) and Merz-Perez et al. (2001) discovered the occurrence of bestiality during their study of animal cruelty. Their research also investigated the relationship between childhood animal abuse and interpersonal violence. The authors used structured interviews with 45 violent and 45 nonviolent incarcerated offenders to examine the specific acts of animal cruelty. Within their sample, three violent offenders reported having engaged in bestiality whereas no nonviolent offenders reported having engaged in any such behavior.

Although these few studies have yielded only a starting point for subsequent studies linking bestiality with interpersonal violence, even fewer researchers have advanced any sort of theoretical explanation of bestiality and its link to interpersonal violence. Beirne (1997) argued that bestiality is best understood

as "interspecies sexual assault" and is similar to the victimization of humans because animals do not consent to sexual acts with humans (since they cannot), these acts involve coercion, and the result for the animal is pain or death, or both. These sex acts are acts of violence during which animals, like humans, are reduced to the status of objects to be manipulated, exploited, and controlled (p. 317). Merz-Perez and Heide (2003) have gone further in their explanation of the link, using sexually polymorphous theory. Infantile sexuality can assume a number of different forms. In certain individuals, "perverse sexual activities" are violent ones that fall outside the parameters of acceptable behavioral norms (p. 66). These activities, including bestiality, occur when "sexuality and aggression have become developmentally fused, and the two are mutually inclusive in the psyche of the offender" (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2003, p. 66). The offender's violence against animals and humans leads to a sexual release and has been most infamously found among cases of serial killers whose childhood and adolescent animal abuse escalated to homicide (Wright & Hensley, 2003).

Clearly, much remains to be known about those individuals who have had sexual encounters with animals and their propensity for interpersonal aggression. It is possible that bestiality may be predictive of human violence. Therefore, the current study sought to further this area of research by examining whether a perpetrator's race, childhood residence, education, commission of a personal crime, and the number of times he or she committed personal crimes affects acts of bestiality committed during childhood and/or adolescence among a sample of incarcerated males.

## Method

### Participants

Between May and June 2003, all inmates housed in one maximum- and two medium-security southern correctional facilities for men were requested to participate in a study of animal cruelty. Of the 2,093 inmates incarcerated at the time, a total of 261 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 12.5%. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the state prison population and the sample. A comparison of the racial composition, type of offense committed, and age distribution of the respondents and the state prison population revealed no significant differences. Thus, the sample appears to be representative of the state prison population in terms of these variables.

**Table 1**  
**Population and Sample Characteristics**

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%	Prison Population Sample	
			<i>n</i>	%
Race:				
White	10,654	67.0	182	70.0
Other	5,280	33.0	78	30.0
Type of offense:				
Interpersonal				
Violent crime	8,000	50.2	125	47.9
Other crime	7,934	49.8	136	52.1
Median age	33 years		33.5 years	

### Survey Instrument

A 39-item questionnaire was constructed in part using a combination of previous researchers' questions regarding animal cruelty and its possible link to later violence toward humans (Ascione, Thompson, & Black, 1997; Boat, 1994; Merz-Perez & Heide, 2003; Merz-Perez et al., 2001). For the purpose of the current study, demographic information including race (White vs. Other), residence (rural vs. urban), and education level (eighth grade or less, some high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, and graduate school) was collected. Respondents were also asked whether they had been convicted of a personal crime and the number of times they had been convicted of personal crimes. Finally, inmates were asked what they did to hurt or kill the animals. Response categories included drowned, hit and/or kicked, shot, choked, burned, or had sex with the animal. Of the 261 respondents, 16 had engaged in bestiality.

### Procedures

After obtaining approval from the state Department of Corrections and traveling to the facilities, correctional counselors distributed self-administered questionnaires to each inmate. Inmates were asked to return their completed questionnaire in a stamped, self-addressed envelope within 1 month of distribution. Inmates were informed that it would take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In addition, the cover letter reiterated their



anonymity while participating in the project. No incentives were given for completion of the survey.

## Results

Of the 261 inmates who responded to the survey, 16 inmates (6.1%) reported having engaged in bestiality. According to Table 1, 68.8% of inmates who engaged in bestiality were White as compared to 70% of the study sample. According to chi-square analysis, significant differences did not emerge between the study sample and inmates who had engaged in bestiality with regard to race. Almost 69% of the inmates who had engaged in bestiality resided in rural areas as compared to only 54.5% of the study sample. Again, chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between the sample and inmates who had engaged in bestiality.

Regarding education level, approximately 31% of those who had engaged in bestiality had less than an eighth-grade education as compared to only 9.2% of the study sample. Furthermore, 31.3% of inmates who had engaged in bestiality were high school graduates as compared to almost 40% of the sample. Significant differences between the sample and inmates who had engaged in bestiality emerged with regard to education level ( $\chi^2 = 9.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 5$ ).

Of the inmates who had engaged in bestiality, 75% had been convicted of a personal crime as compared to only 47.9% of the sample. Significant differences between the sample and inmates who had engaged in bestiality emerged with regard to being convicted of a personal crime ( $\chi^2 = 4.71$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $df = 1$ ). More than 31% of the inmates who had engaged in bestiality had been convicted of personal crimes as compared to only 5.4% of the sample. Again, significant differences were found between the sample and inmates who had engaged in bestiality with regard to the number of times the inmates had been convicted of personal crimes ( $\chi^2 = 23.33$ ,  $p < .00$ ,  $df = 4$ ).

## Discussion

The current study focused on the demographic and criminal characteristics specific to those incarcerated male respondents who admitted to having sex with an animal. Among these respondents, race was not predictive of bestiality and, contrary to the implications of some previous studies, neither was childhood residence. That rural-reared males were no more likely than

**Table 2**  
**A Comparison of the Sample ( $n = 261$ ) and Inmates**  
**Who Engaged in Bestiality ( $n = 16$ )**

	Study Sample		Bestiality	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<b>Race</b>				
White	70.0	182	68.8	11
Other	30.0	78	31.3	5
<b>Residence</b>				
Rural	54.5	138	68.8	11
Urban	45.5	115	31.2	5
<b>Education level</b>				
Eighth grade or less	9.2	24	31.3	5
Some high school	16.9	44	12.5	2
High school graduate	39.6	103	31.3	5
Some college	25.8	67	18.8	3
College graduate	6.2	16	0.0	0
Graduate school	2.3	6	6.3	1
<b>Personal crime</b>				
Yes	47.9	125	75.0	12
No	52.1	136	25.0	4
<b>Number of personal crimes</b>				
0	52.1	136	25.0	4
1	29.5	77	31.3	5
2	9.6	25	0.0	0
3	3.4	9	12.5	2
More than 3	5.4	14	31.4	5

their urban-reared counterparts supports more recent studies, concluding that differences in their socialization experiences relative to the treatment of animals may be diminishing over time.

However, less educated respondents and those respondents who had been convicted of committing crimes against people on one or more occasions were more likely to have admitted to having had sex with animals during their childhood or adolescence than other respondents in the sample. Having less education may imply that these individuals are more likely to engage in sexual acts with animals because they have low social control and less social attachment (Agnew, 1988). Our finding that the bestialic males were more likely to commit crimes against humans supports those studies showing that individuals who commit bestiality tend to demonstrate a diminished capacity for appropriately

relating to other humans and a tendency toward aggressing against them. Having found support for the link between bestiality and interpersonal violence in our sample also lends credence to the sexually polymorphous theory whereby sexuality and aggression have become developmentally fused in these individuals.

Although the current study provides an initial step in examining the association between the sexual abuse of animals and later interpersonal violence, there are strengths and weaknesses associated with it. One of the study's strengths is simply that it explored the previously understudied phenomenon of bestiality (Ascione, 2001). The current study also examined the relationship between sexual animal abuse and the demographic and criminal characteristics among a sample of prison inmates. The present sample of male inmates incarcerated in medium- and maximum-security prisons in a southern state closely mirrors the larger inmate population of the state. In addition, rather than employing a smaller sample and chart reviews, the current study used the survey technique.

However, the current study also has several limitations. First, by solely relying on pencil-and-paper self-reports, we further selected the sample and may have excluded illiterate inmates. Therefore, although the questionnaire method of data collection is arguably superior to simple record review, direct interviews of respondents will reap much richer data in future studies. Second, the data analyzed in the current study were based on prisoners' self-reported behavior, potentially compromising the validity of the inmate's reported behaviors (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2003). Third, although other prison studies dealing with sensitive topics have yielded relatively low response rates, our 12.5% return rate is very low for survey-based methodology. In addition, the number of respondents admitting to bestiality is quite low, and the current study does not include a control group. These conditions could possibly affect the generalizability of the study to the larger population of inmates.

Nonetheless, the current study has sought to expand on the few previous investigations into the factors affecting bestiality as a form of animal cruelty. In general, several studies about animal cruelty itself suggest avenues for future research regarding animal sexual abuse and its association with later interpersonal violence. It has been underscored in the literature that the qualitative nature of animal cruelty may vary substantially (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2003). Our single probe for sexual acts with animals failed to qualify the nature of the act. Thus, future studies should use multiple questions about the sexual abuse of animals. Moreover, the examination of a wider range of factors affecting animal sexual abuse, such as motives and the type of animal sexually abused, can only further our understanding of how this form of cruelty

to animals may or may not lead to later violence against humans. Yet another relevant consideration is the prevalence of animal cruelty, including sexual abuse of animals, by children who were physically and sexually maltreated themselves (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983) and by children who witnessed domestic violence, including acts toward animals (Ascione, 1998). Because the current study did not examine child abuse status (victim or observer) of the inmates, future studies could explore the predictive power of such variables as abuse history and maltreatment, as well as the influences of exposure to domestic violence.

Finally, to enhance our understanding of the predictive validity of child and adolescent animal sexual abuse and later violence toward humans, future studies will have to target nonoffender populations and individuals with prior convictions who are not incarcerated (see Miller & Knutson, 1997). Although the current findings suggest that the sexual abuse of animals in youth may be predictive of later interpersonal violence in adults, this question can only be addressed by examining the outcome of a large cohort of youth who have committed bestiality to determine whether these behaviors are truly predictive and, if so, to what degree. Research such as this may provide new insights and affords us hope for new and improved solutions to these social problems. In sum, the current study along with future investigations could eventually inform a broad range of prevention and intervention strategies for animal sexual abuse and, possibly, for the human violence to which it may be linked.

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