

# Is Homosexuality Normal for Some Animals?

By James E. Phelan, LCSW

*Book Review: Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, by Bruce Bagemihl (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

This book is a 750-page study of homosexual behavior in the animal kingdom. *Biological Exuberance* presents documentation of homosexual behavior in many species, particularly birds and mammals.

Basically, the author explains that because polysexualism among non-human species has been widely observed and documented, then homosexuality is not to be seen as an aberration. But *Biological Exuberance* should be read with much caution. One should not assume that because homosexual behavior exists, then it is necessarily normal and gender-appropriate.

Bagemihl gives special credence to those theorists and biologists who claim that homosexuality may be genetic, and in those who believe that "homosexuality must be beneficial to a species if it keeps reappearing" (p. 169).

Not surprisingly, his perspective invites considerable praise from the homosexual community. On the book's cover, lesbian author and advocate Lillian Faderman writes:

"For anyone who has ever doubted the naturalness of homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered behaviors, this remarkable book, which demonstrates and celebrates the sexual diversity of life on earth, will surely lay those doubts to rest. The massive evidence of the wondrous complexity of sexuality in the natural world that Bagemihl has marshaled will inform, entertain, and persuade academic and lay readers alike."

In a review of Bagemihl's work, *Newsweek* astutely noted the political slant of *Biological Exuberance*:

"...witnessingsame-sex activity and understanding it are two different things, and some experts believe that observers like Bagemihl are misreading the evidence. In species that lack sophisticated language—which is to say all species but ours—sex serves many nonsexual purposes, including establishing alliances and appeasing enemies...all things animals must do with members of

both sexes."

The *Newsweek* reviewer goes on to say that:

"even if some animals do engage in homosexual activity purely for pleasure, their behavior still serves as an incomplete model—and an incomplete explanation—for human behavior." (Kluger, 1999, p. 70.)

Before reading Bagemihl's text, I myself had written a short paper on homosexual behavior among animals (Phelan, 1998). While I too found in the literature instances of polysexual behavior existing among animals, I learned that such behavior took place under unusual conditions, and that there were many possible explanations for such behavior which Bagemihl's book ignores.

This left me suspicious as to why the author took time to write such an extensive text only to leave out the possible explanations for the animals' behavior. Explanations of behavior are a common practice in ethology.

The author would rather "celebrate" homosexual behavior than explain its significance

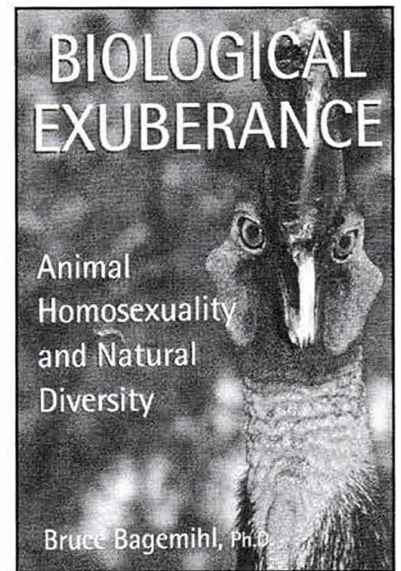
Yet Bagemihl uses his book to explain *not the origin and meaning of the homosexual behavior in its immediate context*, but instead says that it has apparent "evolutionary value." He spends much time categorizing the *frequency and type* of the behaviors, but attaches no other significance to those behaviors. He refuses to consider that the homosexual behavior may be maladaptive.

We might liken Bagemihl's study of animal homosexuality to that of an anthropologist who sees a society engaging in genocide. Simply because it exists, he calls the genocide "normal" and says that it must have some evolutionary value—perhaps for longterm population control, or to promote survival of the fittest.

Similarly in the animal world, the killing of cubs by adult male bears is also a fairly common occurrence, but we don't offer that observation as evidence that infanticide is good or should be normalized.

Many other authors have provided fuller understandings

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*Biological Exuberance, continued from page 19*

of homosexual behavior in non-human species. When entomologist Ali Harari (1997) observed homosexual behavior among female beetles, he offered three possible explanations. Immediately he knew that such behavior was unusual because the females appeared to be "mimicking," or acting. His proposed explanations were that the mimicking females might be attempting to blend in to avoid the sexual attention of unwanted males by pretending to be male as well; or that two females together offered a bigger and therefore, more attractive target to a male; or that males are somewhat more attractive to 'mating' pairs of females when they themselves appear to be mating. Such possibilities are vital to the discussion, rather than merely dismissing the behavior's meaning through "celebration of diversity."

Other explanations for animal homosexual behavior have been posited in the studies I reviewed in my own article. Such behavior may occur due to conditions such as captivity, controlled environments, domestication, non-availability of the opposite sex, hormonal manipulation,

removal of the cerebrum, mistaken identities, misinterpretation of sex calls/odors, a catalyst for mating, expressions of dominance, and immature sex play.

The book's collective data is generally interesting, and the top ic is of value to the respective research community. But because it is an advocacy piece for homosexuality, it has less scientific usefulness than it might have, had the author made more of an effort to be scientifically objective.

*References:*

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Phelan, J. E. (1998). "Deviated Copulation Among Animals." *The Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 1 and 2, pp. 41-50. ■