

# Sexual Diversity in Animals Teaches Us Little About Human Sexuality

by Johanna Krout Tabin, Ph.D.

In a previous Bulletin, the book *Biological Exuberance* was reviewed by NARTH member James Phelan, MSW.

Now our Scientific Advisory Board member Johanna Krout Tabin, Ph.D. adds her own observations about this book. *Biological Exuberance* was dedicated by the book's author to a celebration of sexual diversity.

*Biological Exuberance*, by Bruce Bagemihl, is esthetically pleasing. From an arresting cover, to the typeface and paper, to its exquisite drawings of animals, the book is a delight. Furthermore it is clearly written and well organized.

Yet Bagemihl's book is not so much a scientific contribution, as a political statement. In fact Bagemihl himself is not a biologist. His stated purpose is to convince the reader that homosexuality and male/male bonding occur throughout the animal kingdom, and therefore should be seen as an expectable form of diversity in the human population.

To prove this point, Bagemihl draws upon many naturalistic studies of a large number of species of animals. Yet such observations should elicit no surprise: anyone who has observed dogs frolicking in the park should know that animals pay attention to each other's sexual parts regardless of gender, and male-male mounting behavior is also common. This is not to say that even Bagemihl claims that homosexual behavior and male/male bonding occur in all species, nor that they are commonly observed in many. But he does believe that heterosexuality is a chance behavior which, because it happens to work to support the continuation of a species, has been favored through natural selection.

The author devotes considerable space to providing arguments that contradict interpretations made by others who have reviewed the same material. He does not, however, apply scientific rigor to examining the credibility of studies he has included in his survey. Many studies that he cites are not from peer-reviewed journals. Bagemihl is not a trained biologist (who would, in fact, have recognized the difference in credibility between scientific journals) but is a

specialist in linguistics and cognitive science.

To complicate the matter, the reader cannot make his own, potentially more sophisticated evaluation of the studies because Bagemihl does not identify his sources in the text, but simply lists his references at the end of each section.

Bagemihl is fair-enough as an observer to occasionally mention other, much less palatable types of animal diversity, such as that of animal parents killing and devouring their young. He also mentions lemmings, but without discussing their puzzling and self-destructive habit of marching in droves into the sea, where they drown (their usual avoidance of water notwithstanding). Are mass suicide and infanticide therefore to be considered normal in humans?

The diversity of form and behavior in the animal kingdom is indeed wondrous and worthy of human study. But what one learns from animals, to help us understand ourselves as human beings, is another matter.

We humans, with our formidably developed brains, are not simply directed by gene-driven patterns which are devoid of subjective meaning. Those of us who study homosexuality in humans, for example, know that its foundation lies in meanings rooted in a

person's emotional development.

No study of lower animals reveals a behavior such as the foot fetish, which is a common aspect of human homosexuality in the male. (It is common enough that there is actually a society of homosexual foot fetishists.)

There is much more we need to learn about the complex psychic mechanisms which lead to human homosexual behavior. We also need to learn how many men and women go through a phase of homosexuality, but then succeed in growing beyond it. This is why research is a part of NARTH's ongoing program. But we cannot call a behavior normal and healthy simply because it exists. To understand it, we must interpret its meaning in a larger social and intrapsychic context. ■

