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Attitudes Toward Animal Suffering: An Exploratory Study

John and Valerie Braithwaite

A total of 302 undergraduates in the social sciences and the humanities, at two Australian universities, were given a questionnaire designed to explore public attitudes toward animal suffering. The results, though preliminary, strongly suggest that attitudes may be in great part supportive of animal welfare and animal rights. However, as reflected in the answers to the questionnaire, actual behavior does not always follow suit. The recommendation is made that the animal welfare/animal rights movement should perhaps place more emphasis on raising people's awareness of the inconsistencies between their attitudes toward animals and their behavior concerning them.

Study Design and Study Sample

A key question for the animal welfare/animal rights movement is whether the fundamental tactical challenge to this movement involves changing public attitudes toward animal suffering or persuading people about the inconsistencies between their attitudes and their behavior. This preliminary study of the attitudes of 302 sociology, psychology, and humanities undergraduates at Griffith and Queensland Universities in Australia suggests that public attitudes may be more supportive of the ideas of animal welfare and animal rights than is generally assumed.

Our purpose was to design an exploratory questionnaire that would examine a number of facets of attitudes about animal suffering. The 74 items covered (1) killing versus causing suffering without killing; (2) killing painfully versus painlessly; (3) harming animals for entertainment, for food, ornamentation, or to increase knowledge; and (4) harming several types of animals: pests, as well as pets, other domestic animals or wild animals.

Selected Responses and Implications

Illustrating the surprising opposition to exploitative practices, 89 percent of the respondents to the questionnaire either "disapproved" or "strongly disapproved" of "keeping laying chickens in battery cages which are so small that they cannot spread their wings." This attitude, of course, does not stop the vast majority of these students from eating eggs produced under such conditions. Even for that minority which did not disapprove of the conditions under which chickens are caged, most disapproved of "keeping a cockatoo in a cage which is so small that it cannot spread its wings." A staggering 97 percent of the sample either disapproved or strongly disapproved of this practice. Hence, for almost the entire sample, the basic foundations of the attitudes that underly opposition to factory farming were found to be already in place. Therefore, a more useful focus for the work of animal rights advocates should probably be to persuade some people about the inconsistency between disapproving of confining cockatoos in tiny cages while tolerating chickens being kept under similar conditions.

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Ninety percent of the respondents disapproved of "the use of inhumane killing methods at an abattoir." However, only 41 percent disapproved of "eating meat from an abattoir which uses inhumane methods of killing," and a meagre 8 percent disapproved of "eating meat from an abattoir which uses humane methods of killing." In ascending order of importance, these findings pose three problems of persuasion for the animal advocate:

1. The problem that some of the 8 percent that unconditionally disapprove of eating abattoir-killed meat, nevertheless continue to do so.
2. The problem that some who disapprove of "inhumane" killing believe that what goes on at the abattoirs from which they get their meat is "humane."
3. The problem of disapproving of the *practice* of "inhumanity" while, at the same time, accepting the *eating* of animals that have suffered from such "inhumanity."

We see a similar contradiction in that 73 percent of the respondents disapproved of "force-feeding geese to make their livers swell up to produce paté for restaurants," but the majority of respondents did not disapprove of "eating paté produced by the force-feeding of geese."

Table 1 indicates the level of approval for harming animals under a variety of circumstances in research. Not surprisingly, approval of vivisection increases with the perceived utility of the research for human beings, and also varies according to the degree of pain suffered by the animals. Hence, killing animals painlessly in testing a new drug before it is used on humans was generally considered more acceptable than killing animals painlessly for nonmedical research. The latter was thought by most to be more acceptable than killing animals painfully in testing a new drug before it is used on humans. And this, in turn, was regarded as more acceptable than killing animals painfully for nonmedical research. Tamir and Hamo (1980), in their study of Israeli students, also found that animal suffering was perceived to be more justifiable if the suffering was essential to advances in human medicine.

These questions, plus a series of questions on the testing of eye cosmetics, were all asked with reference to toads, mice, monkeys, and dogs as the experimental animals. On some questions, the use of toads was the most approved choice, while on others the use of mice received more approval than the use of toads. Perhaps surprisingly, on all items the use of monkeys in experiments had higher approval than the use of dogs. This confirms an identical finding by Tennov (1980). Phylogenetically, monkeys are more similar to human beings than dogs are. Therefore, it would seem that the closeness of human beings to pets is a more important factor in determining antivivisectionist attitudes than is evolutionary similarity to man.

If we look at the 10 most strongly disapproved practices in Table 1 which mention a specific type of animal, 8 involve dogs (see also Tamir and Hamo, 1980:306). The other two are "harpooning whales" and "shooting an elephant for its tusks." Practices involving an ecological threat as well as animal suffering tended to be perceived as particularly objectionable (see also Kellert, 1975).

Another possible generalization that can be drawn from the results in Table 1 is that acts of commission were viewed as more serious than acts of omission. For example, "intentionally placing a moth into a tub of water to watch it drown" was disapproved by 84 percent of the sample, while most respondents did not disapprove of "leaving a moth which has fallen in a tub of water to drown."

TABLE 1. Approval or Disapproval of Practices Relating to Animals

	Strongly Disapprove %	Disapprove %	Neither Approve Nor Disapprove %	Approve %	Strongly Approve %
Commercial fishing with nets	3	8	37	44	7
Eating meat from an abattoir which uses humane methods of killing	4	4	39	41	12
Killing toads painlessly in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	5	10	30	43	13
Spraying insects in the home with insect spray	5	12	19	47	18
Killing mice in a mousetrap	6	14	26	43	11
Killing mice painlessly in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	6	11	28	43	12
Leaving a moth which has fallen in a tub of water to drown	6	29	54	9	1
Protecting crops by spraying chemicals which kill beetles and insects	7	16	26	43	8
Killing sharks found near beaches used by bathers	9	23	17	37	14
Killing monkeys painlessly in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	10	24	29	32	5
Big game fishing	11	21	39	25	4
Buck jumping at a rodeo	11	21	48	17	3
Shooting animals for sport when the animal is a pest to farmers	14	32	26	25	4
Rabbit shooting	15	28	27	25	5
A person having his dog put to sleep painlessly because it has become a nuisance to him	15	26	28	24	6
Killing dogs painlessly in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	15	30	23	27	5
Eating meat from an abattoir which uses inhumane methods of killing	16	25	50	8	2
Branding cattle with a hot iron	16	25	40	17	2
Eating paté produced by the force-feeding of geese	18	28	42	9	4
Shooting kangaroos to cut down on kangaroo overpopulation	18	26	25	26	5

TABLE 1. Approval or Disapproval of Practices Relating to Animals (Continued)

	Strongly Disapprove %	Disapprove %	Neither Approve Nor Disapprove %	Approve %	Strongly Approve %
Wearing genuine fur coats	19	28	35	16	3
Killing mice painlessly for non-medical research	19	27	30	21	3
Shooting game birds	20	41	22	15	2
Killing toads painlessly for non-medical research	21	30	28	18	3
Confining pigs in very small sties	23	55	19	3	0
Jockeys whipping horses in races	24	36	30	8	2
Killing toads painfully in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	24	35	22	16	3
Failing to stop to assist a kangaroo which has been knocked down on the side of the road	25	44	28	3	0
Killing mice painfully in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	25	38	19	16	2
Leaving cattle overnight in an abattoir holding yard without food or water	27	41	24	7	0
A farmer refusing to spend the money to have a very sick pig treated by a vet	27	41	28	4	0
Sending monkeys up in space shots so that they die in outer space	28	34	29	9	1
Conducting painful experiments with toads to test whether new eye cosmetics would sting the eyes of humans	29	40	19	12	1
Overcrowding cattle on a semi-trailer during a long trip	32	48	17	3	0
Killing monkeys painlessly for non-medical research	35	39	17	8	1
Conducting painful experiments with mice to test whether new cosmetics would sting the eyes of humans	35	42	16	7	0
Killing mice painfully for non-medical research	37	44	12	6	1
Force-feeding geese to make their livers swell up to produce paté for restaurants	38	35	21	5	1

TABLE 1. Approval or Disapproval of Practices Relating to Animals (Continued)

	Strongly Disapprove %	Disapprove %	Neither Approve Nor Disapprove %	Approve %	Strongly Approve %
Killing monkeys painfully in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	38	38	13	11	1
Killing dogs painlessly for non-medical research	38	38	15	8	2
Recklessly destroying a bird's nest while clearing a piece of land	40	40	18	2	0
Refusing to spend the money to take a very sick cat to the vet	41	44	11	3	1
Intentionally placing a moth into a tub of water to watch it drown	43	41	14	2	0
Caging wild animals in small cages at a zoo	44	45	9	1	0
Keeping laying chickens in battery cages which are so small that they cannot spread their wings	45	44	10	0	0
Killing dogs painfully in testing a new drug before it is used on humans	45	33	11	9	2
Bull fighting in which the bull is killed	46	35	15	4	0
Conducting painful experiments with monkeys to test whether new eye cosmetics would sting the eyes of humans	47	40	9	5	0
Leaving drought-stricken cattle to slowly starve instead of shooting them	47	44	7	1	0
Killing toads painfully for non-medical research	49	35	11	4	1
Cock fighting in which the chicken is killed	53	34	10	3	0
Conducting painful experiments with dogs to test whether new eye cosmetics would sting the eyes of humans	54	38	6	3	0
Killing monkeys painfully for non-medical research	54	38	6	2	0
Using live bait for greyhound training	55	31	11	2	1
Keeping a cockatoo in a cage which is so small that it cannot spread its wings	55	42	2	0	0
Shooting pelicans	57	37	5	0	0

TABLE 1. Approval or Disapproval of Practices Relating to Animals (Continued)

	Strongly Disapprove %	Disapprove %	Neither Approve Nor Disapprove %	Approve %	Strongly Approve %
A person killing his pet dog and then eating it for food	58	20	17	5	0
Getting rid of a pet dog by leaving it loose in the bush	59	34	5	2	0
The use of inhumane killing methods at an abattoir	59	31	8	1	0
Killing dogs painfully for non-medical research	62	29	7	2	0
Shooting an elephant for its tusks	62	30	6	1	0
Tying up a dog on a very short rope for periods of more than twelve hours	63	32	4	2	0
Harpooning whales	63	25	8	3	0
Killing animals painfully when there is an alternative method available which is painless	76	20	3	1	0
Setting a poison meat bait for a dog	78	16	5	1	1
A person letting his pet dogs loose in the bush and shooting them for sport	86	13	1	1	0
Leaving a pet dog without food or water for a long period	89	10	1	0	0
Shooting an animal for sport when the animal is close to extinction	88	10	1	0	0
A person leaving his dog to starve to death because it has become a nuisance to him	92	7	1	0	0
It is wrong to eat meat under any circumstances	37	50	10	2	1
There is nothing wrong with eating meat if eating meat is the only food available for human survival	3	7	10	44	35
It is wrong to eat meat when there is an alternative satisfactory diet available	19	46	23	9	4
The law should force abattoirs to kill animals painlessly even when the animals could be killed more cheaply and efficiently by a painful method	2	4	14	43	37
I would be prepared to pay a higher price for meat to cover the cost of more humane methods of rearing animals for slaughter	5	15	21	41	18

Major Underlying Attitudes

To explore the structure of attitudes toward animal suffering further, the responses were analyzed using principal-component analysis, followed by a varimax rotation. This procedure locates the major independent attitude dimensions that underly a set of items. It is, in effect, a strategy for locating clusters of items that share something in common, such that people who approve of one item in the cluster are likely to approve of the others and vice versa.

The first and largest factor consisted of items that seem to involve wanton painful practices that do not serve a significant social purpose. The items loading most heavily on this factor were "a person leaving his dog to starve to death because it has become a nuisance to him," "shooting an elephant for its tusks," "cock-fighting in which the chicken is killed" and "using live bait for greyhound training."

The second factor was dominated by practices that are conventionally acceptable because they are viewed as serving a social purpose. The highest loadings were: "shooting animals for sport when the animal is a pest to farmers," "big game fishing," and "spraying insects in the home with insect spray."

There were two other interpretable factors. The first of these was found to consist principally of farm-related practices. Highest loadings were: "overcrowding cattle on a semi-trailer during a long trip," "confining pigs in very small sties," "a farmer refusing to spend the money to have a very sick pig treated by a vet," and "leaving cattle overnight in an abattoir holding yard without food or water."

The remaining interpretable factor was defined by items that involved the actual killing of animals, as opposed to harming them without killing.

Conclusion

The present research has approached the study of attitudes toward animals with a more specific focus—on suffering—than was used in the classic studies of Kellert (1975, 1978, 1980). It represents only a very tentative beginning toward an understanding of the structure of peoples' attitudes about animal suffering. However, it does raise the question of whether more fruitful avenues for future research might lie in exploring the structure of the inconsistencies *between attitudes and behavior*, rather than in further analysis of the structure of attitudes alone. It may be that the animal welfare/animal rights movement should be less concerned with changing public attitudes than with mobilizing existing attitudes that support animal rights-related ideals into conduct that is consistent with those ideals.

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Braithwaite

Öffentliche Haltungen gegen das Leid bei den Tieren: Ein Forschungsstudium

Zusammenfassung

Um die öffentlichen Haltungen gegen das menschlich verursachte Leid der Tiere auszuforschen, verteilten die Autoren einen dazu bestimmten Fragebogen an 302 Studenten der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften bei zwei australischen Universitäten. Die Ergebnisse dieser vorläufigen Forschung weisen stark darauf hin, dass die Gesinnung der Öffentlichkeit im grossen Teil zur Tierschutz und "Tierrechte" geneigt ist. Doch, wie die Ergebnisse auch zeigen, passt das Verhalten der Studenten ihre Haltungen überhaupt nicht gut an. Deshalb meinen die Autoren, dass die Tierschutz-/ Tierrechtbewegung grössere Einwirkung haben kann, wenn sie sich darauf richtet, das Bewusstsein des Publikums vom Widerspruch zwischen sein Verhalten und seine Haltungen den Tieren gegenüber zu erheben.