The effects of level of support for animal protection organisations on attitudes to the use of animals and other social issues

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Abstract

Animal protection issues are being advanced increasingly by Non-Government Organisations, yet the views of their supporters are little understood. We surveyed attitudes towards animals and other social issues in 3,462 university students from over 103 universities in eleven European and Asian countries. The extent to which those respondents that supported animal protection organisations had more concern for animals than those who did not support such organisations was investigated, and whether this concern was generalised to other world social issues. Of the respondents, 36% sometimes and 6% very often supported animal protection organisations and 2% identified themselves as key members. Supporters and key members had increased scores on indices that measured their concerns for animal welfare (+ 6%), animals in experimentation (+ 7%), and other major social issues (+ 5%), compared with non-supporters. Supporters were also likely to have lived with pets for longer, suggesting that this was one of the drivers for their increased concern for animals. Key members of the organisations rated the sentience of humans lower (–9%) than other students rated them, and nearer to that of animals. The level of support for the organisations was directly related to avoidance of poultry, pork and beef meat. It is concluded that support for animal protection organisations is an indicator of attitudes towards animals and other social issues, and food consumption habits.

Keywords: animal ethics, animal protection organisations, animal welfare, Non-Government Organisations, social issues, student attitudes

Introduction

Many surveys have been conducted to elucidate society’s perceptions of animals. These have usually concentrated on demographic correlates of attitudes to animal use and issues, particularly gender (Driscoll 1992; Eldridge & Gluck 1996; Peek et al 1996; Wells & Hepper 1997; Hagelin et al 1999; Paul & Podberseck 2000; Hagelin et al 2003; Heleski et al 2004; Phillips & McCulloch 2005; Serpell 2005; Herzog 2007; Phillips et al 2011; Izmirli & Phillips 2012), experience with keeping animals (Paul & Serpell 1993; Wells & Hepper 1997; Izmirli & Phillips 2012), education level and vegetarianism (Izmirli & Phillips 2011). However, only a few studies (eg Plou 1991; Einwohner 1999) have been conducted to examine the relationship between being a membership of animal protection organisations (APOs) and attitudes to the use of animals. These APOs are increasingly driving the improvement of welfare standards and the attitudes of those supporting them are therefore influential. Whilst it is known, and to be expected, that supporters have greater concern for animals than those in the general community (Signal & Taylor 2006), the generalisation of these attitudes to other social issues has not been investigated.

Animal protection organisations generally follow one of two paths towards improving animal welfare and rights issues. First, they may attempt to activate the public on issues that they believe are capable of being changed by guardians of the issues (Hallahan 2001). This Issues Processes Model involves identifying four main public groups: 1) active members of the public, those with a high level of knowledge and direct involvement in an animal welfare agency; 2) aroused members of the public, with a low level of knowledge but significant involvement and therefore likely to be core followers of a social movement; 3) aware members of the public, with a high level of knowledge but low involvement, who are not likely to effect change but may join initiatives; and 4) inactive members of the public with a low level of both knowledge and involvement and unlikely to engage or effect change. Second, animal protection organisations may envisage that there is a struggle between the advocates and guardians of the issues for the minds and support of the public. This Movement Action Plan recognises and utilises trigger events to activate public sentiment, such as the Australian footage of live export cattle being slaughtered in Indonesia in 2011 (Tiplady et al 2012).