Public attitudes towards grief in animals

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Abstract

Animals under human management are often separated from conspecifics, which may lead to behaviour indicative of separation distress or grief. For the purposes of this paper, grief is considered as a biological response to separation, indicated by a bi-phasic ‘protest-despair’ behavioural response. It is reasonable to assume that only animals which are able to form complex social bonds can experience grief. Scientific experiments have suggested that some farm and laboratory animals experience distress or grief as a result of maternal separation and social isolation. However, little is known about whether the public believe that animals are capable of grief. Therefore, we surveyed 1,000 members of the public to establish what knowledge they have about grief in animals and to compare this to what we know in science. The survey revealed that 90% of the general public believed that some or all animals can experience grief, with 23% believing that all animals can grieve. They attributed grief more to companion animals and animals with higher level cognitive abilities than to farm animals and animals that may be feared. It is concluded that public belief about grief in animals extends beyond scientific evidence, and that educating people about scientific findings and management practices connected with grief and separation distress may improve the welfare of farm and laboratory animals.

Keywords: animals, animal welfare, emotion, grief, public attitudes, separation

Introduction

In human management systems, animals are often abruptly separated from their mothers (Newberry & Swanson 2008; Enriquez et al 2011) and other conspecifics (Siebert et al 2011) either temporarily or permanently. Both separation and social isolation may have a negative physiological and emotional effect on animals, which could directly impact upon their welfare.

Bowlby describes grief as:

A peculiar amalgam of anxiety, anger, and despair following the experience of what is feared to be an irretrievable loss...

and he differentiates it from separation anxiety saying:

Anxiety is experienced when the loss is believed to be retrievable and hope remains (Bowlby 1961).

Bowlby’s description relates to the human experience of grief, and predominantly the psychological aspects of this emotion, the nature of which cannot be definitively known or inferred in animals. However, as emotions act to govern behaviour in response to specific events, behavioural and physiological changes are often induced by these events. Grief is considered by Averill (1968) to be:

A biological reaction, the evolutionary function of which is to ensure group cohesiveness in species where a social form of existence is necessary for survival...

Which also

Comprises a stereotyped set of psychological and physiological reactions.

Humans exhibit emotional responses to loss including depression, anxiety and anger, but may also suffer from physiological symptoms, such as sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and decreased immunological resistance (Boccia et al 1997; Stroebe et al 2007). It is difficult to know for certain whether a non-human animal has a conscious emotional experience of grief similar to that of a human. Our understanding of the subjective experience of animals is limited by their communication capabilities, and the potential differences between our psychological responses to stresses and theirs. However, some of these physiological symptoms could compromise an animal’s ability to cope with survival situations, impair growth and reproduction, and increase susceptibility to disease (Weary & Chua 2000).

It is reasonable to assume that only animals which are able to form complex social bonds with conspecifics can experience grief as a result of severance of these bonds. A social bond is defined by Newberry and Swanson (2001) as:

A mutual, affectionate, emotional attachment between two individuals that is relatively long lasting and survives temporary separations.