Does owning a companion animal influence the belief that animals experience emotions such as grief?

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Abstract

This paper investigates public attitudes towards emotional experiences in animals. We surveyed 1,000 members of the public to investigate how companion animal ownership affects the attribution of emotions to animals and beliefs about whether animals can grieve. Respondents who owned a companion animal were more likely to believe that some animals can experience grief compared with respondents that did not own a companion animal. The non-owning respondents were more likely to believe that animals do not experience emotions including: anxiety, distress or depression, do not show behavioural changes when they are experiencing grief and do not grieve as a result of separation from a conspecific. Our findings show that companion animal ownership plays a significant role in the public perception of the emotional experiences of animals and belief in the animals’ ability to grieve.

Keywords: animal welfare, companion animal, emotions, grief, public attitudes, separation

Introduction

The study of emotions in animals has engaged scientists since Darwin’s founding work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) and is one of the essential elements of animal welfare (Dawkins 2001). The fundamental complication in investigating emotions is that we are unable to measure the internal experience of another being (Panksepp 1998) and are therefore unable to know conclusively whether animals experience emotions. Scientists engaged in this field of study have been undeterred by this impediment and in endeavouring to measure animal emotions, a number of methods have been developed and applied. Examples include: neural homologies (eg Panksepp 2007, 2011); behaviour and physiology (eg Reefman et al 2009; Zimmerman et al 2011; Reimert et al 2013); appraisal theory (Boissy et al 2007; Greiveldinger et al 2007), human judgment of subjective experience (Wemelsfelder et al 2001) and most recently, measurement of cognitive appraisal (Harding et al 2004; Mendl et al 2009). A further complication to the study of emotions is the differentiation between basic emotions, such as joy and fear, and emotions considered more complex, like guilt or embarrassment (Ekman 1999). Although there is general agreement that differentiation between basic and complex emotions exists, the categorisation of some individual emotions is still debated (Ekman 1992; Panksepp 2005; Sabini & Silver 2005; Morris et al 2008).

Regardless of science evidencing the existence of emotions in animals, the belief that animals experience emotions underlies public concern regarding animal welfare (Dawkins 2001; Burman et al 2008), and improvements to animal welfare legislation are primarily driven by public attitudes towards animals (Kirkwood & Hubrecht 2001; Serpell 2004). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect that companion animal ownership has on beliefs regarding the emotional experience of animals. Companion animal ownership promotes positive attitudes towards animals (eg Wells & Hepper 1995; Fidler 2003; Cutt et al 2006; Daly & Morton 2009). These attitudinal effects have been investigated for both children and adults (Paul & Serpell 1996), and findings suggest that strong attitudes towards the use of animals are formed early in development (Wells & Hepper 1995). Schoolchildren that own pets show high levels of concern regarding activities that lead to the death or injury of animals (Wells & Hepper 1995). Children (and adults) who own dogs have a more positive attitude towards dogs in general when compared to those who do not own dogs or those that own cats or other pets (Lakestani