Effects of field of study on university students’ attitudes towards animal issues

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Abstract

The field of study of university students may influence their attitudes towards animals, which in turn may influence their behaviour. Attitudes to animals in university students in eleven countries were obtained by survey, and the influence of field of study was evaluated after correcting for other influential factors. Students of agriculture were most accepting of killing animals, unnatural practices on animals, animal experimentation and animal rights issues, whereas humanities and arts students were less accepting of unnatural practices on animals and animal experimentation than students of other disciplines. Nevertheless, agriculture students had one of the highest proportions involved in animal protection organisations. It is suggested that regular contact with animals inures agriculture students to animal issues, whereas students in the humanities and arts, that have less contact with farm animals, have greater concern.

Keywords: animal rights, animals, animal welfare, students, study area, university

Introduction

Attitudes play a central role in determining people’s intention to perform specific behaviours (Azjen 2005). They derive principally from people’s beliefs regarding the consequences of actions, normative beliefs concerning behaviours expected by others, and control beliefs regarding the feasibility of behaviours (Azjen 2005). Attitudes towards animals are affected by many psychosocial factors that have been described in detail, often with tertiary students as questionnaire respondents, eg gender, pet-keeping behaviour and culture (Izmirli & Phillips 2011; Phillips et al 2011, 2012). Students’ subject of study is one factor that has rarely been explored, but is likely to be related through both the students’ selection of topics that match their interests and behaviour and also the influence that their study has on their attitudes. Torkar et al (2012) found a correlation in university students of education (biology or primary) between a positive attitude towards biology and that towards animals. Hagelin et al (2000) reported that agriculture, pharmacy, biomedicine and physician students were more likely than nursing students to approve of xenotransplantation, a contentious use of animals to donate body parts to humans. However, Pearce et al (2006) reported no difference between arts and science students in their support for the practice.

The research described in this paper was part of a cross-cultural study into attitudes towards animals in Eurasian students (Izmirli & Phillips 2011; Phillips et al 2011, 2012). The objective of this part of the study was to determine the extent to which students’ area of study influenced their attitude to animal welfare and rights, and whether this related to concern for other social issues.

Materials and methods

The survey method utilised responses from 3,462 students from approximately 103 universities in eleven Eurasian countries. Survey method and responses concerning food avoidance (Izmirli & Phillips 2011), nation and ethnic group (Phillips et al 2012), differences between male and female respondents (Phillips et al 2011) and extent of support for animal protection organisations (Phillips & Izmirli 2012) have been documented previously. In brief, a call was distributed through relevant organisations, eg the International Society for Applied Ethology, for volunteer academic collaborators to organise a survey of students’ attitudes to social issues, in particular animal management, in their country. Suitable collaborators volunteered in 21 countries worldwide, but those in nine countries dropped out over the course of the project, leaving 12 countries as a convenience sample. Subsequently, one country, Portugal, was also excluded because of low response rates. Those remaining represented a broad spectrum of cultures and geographical regions of Europe and Asia (China, Czech Republic, Iran, Ireland, South Korea, Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom). In all cases except Norway and Sweden, where access by e-mail to the entire student populations in the selected universities was possible, collaborators organised a team of student volunteers to recruit respondents in a sample of universities in their country. Where possible, the universities were selected at random, but in some countries a convenience sample was used. The target number of respondents in each country was related to the population, and results were weighted to correct for...