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The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2016, 25: 275-286
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.25.2.275

Empathy towards animals and belief in animal-human-continuity in Italian veterinary students

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Abstract

Empathy towards animals and beliefs in animal-human continuity appear to play an important role in shaping the human-animal relationship and in determining the way animals are treated and cared for. Veterinary medicine plays a central role in animal welfare and has been recognised as a highly caring profession, especially in companion animal practice: however, a number of studies have indicated that veterinary students show a decline in empathy towards animals and an increasing tendency to see them in Cartesian terms as they progress through veterinary education. In the present study we used the Animal Empathy Scale and the Human-Animal Continuity Scale to investigate empathy towards animals and beliefs in animal-human continuity in a sample of first-year (n = 131) and final-year (n = 158) veterinary students of the University of Milan, Italy. Results revealed a difference in empathy towards animals, with first-year students scoring significantly higher than those at the end of their academic training. This variation in empathy over time emerged in both male and female students, however females always had higher empathy scores than males. Moreover, veterinary students at the end of their course reported a more instrumental attitude toward animals, more pronounced in males than in females. Similarly, there was a difference in the perception of continuity between humans and animals which was more evident in males, with first-year students scoring higher than fifth-year students in some items. Results are discussed in relation to previous studies carried out in other countries and, given the importance of empathy in the veterinary profession, potential reasons underlying its apparent decrease are considered.

Keywords: *animal welfare, empathy, gender differences, human-animal continuity, veterinary medicine, veterinary students*