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

ES Colombo*†, A Pelosi‡ and E Prato-Previde*†

† Dipartimento di Fisiopatologia Medico-Chirurgica e dei Trapianti, Sezione di Neuroscienze, Università degli Studi di Milano, Via Fratelli Cervi 93, 20090, Segrate (MI), Italy
‡ Dipartimento di Neuroscienze, Unità di Psicologia, Università degli Studi di Parma, Piazzale San Francesco 43100 Parma, Italy
* Contact for correspondence and request for reprints: elisasilvia.colombo@unimi.it or emanuela.pratoprevide@unimi.it

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

Introduction

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the welfare of animals. Domestic pets as well as farm, research and wild animals have all come under the microscope as have the factors influencing human-animal interactions (eg Taylor et al 2004; Serpell 2005; Signal & Taylor 2006; Sherman & Serpell 2008; Meyer et al 2014).

It has been shown that empathy towards animals, anthropomorphism (ie the tendency to attribute mental states and emotions similar to our own to other species) and beliefs in animal mind and sentience play an important role in shaping both concern for animal welfare and the human-animal relationship (Hills 1993; Serpell 2003; Butterfield et al 2012). There is also agreement that these three factors are interlinked (Hills 1995; Knight et al 2004; Apostol et al 2013).

The term empathy, used colloquially to indicate the capacity for people to understand and share the feelings of others (either conspecific or not), refers to a complex multidimensional psychological process, comprising both emotional and cognitive components (Davis 1980; Preston & de Waal 2002; de Waal 2008; Dziobek et al 2008); the former involves affective resonance with others’ emotions and the generation of an appropriate emotional response, while the latter includes abilities such as recognising and understanding another’s emotions and feelings (Taylor & Signal 2005) and perspective-taking (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright 2004; Schulte-Rüther et al 2008).

As a whole, empathy allows an individual to relate quickly to the emotional state of other individuals and has visible effects on overt behaviour: the understanding of others’ suffering is characterised by a negative experience, which can lead both to prosocial behaviour, namely a behavioural effort to alleviate the distress of others and promote their welfare (de Waal 2008; Knafo et al 2008), and to personal distress, ie an excessive arousal that elicits defensive behaviours or strategies of affective control (Decety & Lamm 2011).

There is evidence that the empathic response is amplified by similarity (for example, in appearance, racial group and personality) and familiarity (social closeness and previous positive experiences), and is suppressed in relation to