Public concern for animal welfare and its correlation with ethical ideologies after coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in China

B Su*† and P Martens‡

† School of Philosophy and Social Development, Shandong University, Jinan, People’s Republic of China
‡ University College Venlo, Maastricht University, Venlo, The Netherlands
* Contact for correspondence: subingtao@sdu.edu.cn

Abstract

The outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) represents a major public health challenge and a serious threat to sustainable social development. A consideration of animal welfare is clearly justified, given the potential contribution of animals to the spread of the disease. The present study, therefore, sought to investigate the concern the Chinese people have for animal welfare (PCAW) and how their ‘ethical ideology’ (idealism and relativism) determines PCAW after COVID-19, through comparison with the same study, carried out in China in 2015. Our results demonstrated a significant improvement in Chinese PCAW after COVID-19. The adverse impact of COVID-19 may have resulted in a lowered idealism score and this decreased score served to neutralise significant correlations between idealism and PCAW, compared to the 2015 results. The global pandemic did not increase people’s relativism score and a significant correlation was found between relativism and PCAW. Gender, age, educational level, public perception of animals after COVID-19, zoo and aquarium visiting were all shown to be predictor variables for PCAW. This study is one of the first to investigate Chinese PCAW after COVID-19 and can therefore provide knowledge that will potentially increase Chinese PCAW.

Keywords: animal welfare, China, COVID-19, culture, ethical idealism, ethical relativism

Introduction

The latest threat to global health is the quick spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Fauci et al 2020). The global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than 106 million confirmed cases and in excess of two million deaths (Lau et al 2021). It is evidence of the potential for the animal-human interface to act as the primary source of emerging zoonotic diseases (Tiwari et al 2020) and this disease outbreak is a matter of human and animal health (Bonilla-Aldana et al 2020; Gortázar & de la Fuente 2020). However, it also sheds light upon illegal and unregulated activity pertaining to the trade and consumption of wild meat reflecting the negligent approach to animal welfare which is the subject of vigorous debate by various animal welfare organisations (Roe & Lee 2021). Since then, there has been growing interest in the relationship between disease severity and animal welfare (eg regulation of the trade in wildlife, the safety of animal products [in particular seafood], and veterinary care of companion animals) (Aitken 2020; Hashem et al 2020; Baptista et al 2021).

Animal welfare is a multidisciplinary concept and, according to OIE (the World Animal Health Organisation), at its core it is defined by how an animal copes within the conditions it finds itself. Here, the concept refers to the welfare of animals in general. An animal is in a good state of welfare if it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear and distress (Prescott & Lidster 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the significance of animal welfare since animals are linked inextricably to science and ethics, animal and human health and, ultimately, the benefit of society as a whole (De Paula Vieira & Anthony 2020). Identifying variables that impact animal welfare may, therefore, imbue the public with greater knowledge regarding how to promote animal welfare as well as protect social health and the environment against the negative effects of COVID-19.

Previous research has shown gender, age, education, pet ownership, culture, and ethical ideology to be highly correlated with people’s concern for animal welfare (PCAW) (Herzog et al 2015; Bègue & Laine 2017; Su & Martens 2017; Su et al 2018a). Of these, ethical ideology has not been studied extensively due to the complicated cultural and philosophical nuances. Ethical ideology has the capability to explain differences in moral judgments. This set of attitudes, beliefs, and values may offer guidance to individuals to help judge and resolve ethically questionable behaviour (Forsyth & Nye 1990). According to Forsyth (1980), ethical ideology can be defined along two dimensions: idealism and relativism. Idealism describes people’s