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Society & Animals Journal of Human-Animal Studies



Volume 2, Number 2, 1994

Animal Rights and Human Social Issues

David A. Nibert 1
Wittenberg University

Using survey data from a sample of residents of Clark County, Ohio, the author explores the relationship between support for animal rights and opinions on eleven social issues pertaining to gun control, acceptance of violence, and rights for minority groups. Findings show that support for animal rights is significantly related to seven of the eleven variables, suggesting the existence of an important link between one's disposition toward human and nonhuman animals.

Opponents of animal rights frequently have trivialized the concerns expressed by animal activists, suggesting that their time should be spent on more important human issues. However, concern for humans and concern for animals may not be as distinct as some contend. It has long been suggested that the ethical treatment of other animals may benefit humans as well. For example, Immanuel Kant, although not a strong supporter of animal welfare, recognized the relationship between people's callous treatment of animals and their treatment of each other (Midgley, 1984). Early feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, highlighted the similarities and relationship between man's domination of nonhuman animals and man's domination of women (Donovan, 1990). Contemporary feminist scholarship continues to illuminate this relationship (Adams, 1992; Birke, 1991; Clifton, 1990).

Albert Schweitzer noted, "[a]nyone who has accustomed himself to regard the life of any living creature as worthless is in danger of arriving also at the idea of worthless human lives." Margaret Mead stated, "One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it" (both quoted in Lockwood & Hodge, 1986). In the early part of this century, the American Humane Society undertook a nationwide education program to promote kindness to animals, based on the assumption that people who treat nonhuman animals well also will treat human beings well (Moulton, Kaufmann, & Filip, 1991).

Recent anecdotal information has provided some support for these assumptions. Studies of domestic violence have revealed cases where attacks against the family pet preceded wife abuse (Gelles & Strauss, 1988), and threats against pets have been used by child sexual abusers as a method of silencing children they assault (Faller, 1990; Finkelhor, Williams and Burns, 1988). Additionally, an examination of the backgrounds of recent serial killers has revealed that several had histories of abusing animals (Lockwood & Hodge, 1986).

The few quantitative studies conducted to date have also shown a relationship between humans' treatment of animals and their treatment of each other. A study of 23 cruelty reports compiled by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in one community in England found that 83% of the reported households had also been identified by human service agencies as having a child at risk for abuse or neglect (Hutton, 1983). Another study examined 57 families with companion animals being treated for child abuse by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services. In 88% of these cases, at least one family member had abused and in two-thirds of the cases an abusive parent had killed or injured an animal (DeViney, Dickert & Lockwood, 1983). An examination of the history of animal cruelty among three groups of men labeled as aggressive criminals, nonaggressive criminals and noncriminals found that 25% of the group labeled aggressive criminals reported five or more early acts of animal cruelty, compared to six percent of those labeled nonaggressive criminals and none of the noncriminals (Felthous & Kellert, 1985). Additionally, a 1989 examination of Congressional voting revealed that members of Congress who supported animal welfare legislation were also likely to support legislation protecting the rights and needs of individual citizens and workers (Kimball, 1989).

Animal advocates are using these findings to promote laws that increase penalties for animal cruelty. Wisconsin recently adopted legislation making certain forms of animal abuse a felony, and related legislation has been enacted in Indiana, Oregon, Hawaii and Pennsylvania. Legislation is pending in Ohio that would create harsher penalties, while also requiring psychological counseling for convicted animal abusers.

If there is a relationship between human behavior toward humans and nonhuman animals, it would be reasonable to expect that human dispositions toward animals are related to positions on certain social issues, particularly violence and the acceptance of rights for minority groups. This question was explored using data from an opinion survey conducted in a Midwestern community.

Method

Five hundred and one residents of Clark County, Ohio, aged eighteen and older, responded to a telephone survey conducted April 16-18, 1993. Clark County has a population of 147,548. A systematic sample of telephone numbers was selected from the area telephone directory; the last number was changed by the "plus one" method to increase randomness and the probability of obtaining new or unlisted numbers (Landon & Banks, 1977; Frey, 1983). A respondent from within the household was selected by alternately asking for the youngest woman, youngest man, oldest woman or oldest man who resided in the household.

The survey was designed to explore respondents' opinions on several social issues. One of the questions was, "Some people say that animals have rights that people should respect. Would you agree or disagree?" Respondents were also asked eleven questions adapted from the General Social Survey (Wood, 1990). One of these questions pertained to gun control, one to acceptance of violence, four to issues of particular concern to women (domestic violence, rape, abortion and employment of women), three to rights for people who are homosexual, and two to race relations. These questions, along with the names of the variables, are listed below:

permit yes 286 (87%) 41 (13%) 21.74 1 .000 .230 437
 no 74 (67%) 36 (33%)
 abortion yes 224 (65%) 122 (35%) 8.31 1 .004 .147 420
 no 34(46%) 40 (54%)
 neighbor yes 26 (63%) 15 (37%) 8.13 1 .004 .147 436
 no 328 (83%) 67 (17%)
 punch yes 182 (78%) 52 (22%) 4.96 1 .023 .114 428
 no 168 (87%) 26 (13%)
 rape yes 88 (74%) 31 (26%) 4.90 1 .027 .114 429
 no 260 (84%) 50 (16%)
 military yes 190 (86%) 32 (14%) 4.15 1 .042 .109 397
 no 135 (77%) 40 (23%)
 speech yes 299 (87%) 46 (13%) 3.92 1 .048 .106 418
 no 56 (77%) 17 (23%)
 domestic very 170 (85%) 30 (15%) 4.98 2 .083 .106 438
 somewhat 164 (80%) 41 (20%)
 not 23 (70%) 10 (30%)
 teach yes 271 (79%) 70 (21%) 1.59 1 .208 .070 412
 no 51(72%) 20 (28%)
 work yes 279 (78%) 77 (22%) 1.38 1 .240 .064 436
 no 68 (85%) 12 (15%)
 marriage yes 44 (12%) 312 (88%) .00 1 1.00 .000 437
 no 10 (12%) 71 (88%)

Mixed results were found for the items pertaining to issues of particular concern to women. Animal rights supporters were significantly less likely to imagine a situation where rape would be the fault of the victim ($\chi^2=4.90$, $p=.027$), and they were significantly more likely to support the ability of a woman to obtain an abortion ($\chi^2=8.31$, $p=.004$). Although animal rights supporters were more likely than nonsupporters to consider domestic violence a serious issue, this difference did not achieve a level of statistical significance ($\chi^2=4.98$, $p=.083$). Respondents' answers to the question about a woman working when her husband could support her revealed no significance difference between those who supported animal rights and those who did not ($\chi^2=1.38$, $p=.240$), although on this question animal rights supporters were slightly less likely to support a woman working in such a situation.

Two of the three questions pertaining to the rights of people who are homosexual were also answered differently by those who supported animal rights and those who did not. Animal rights supporters were significantly more likely to support the rights of a person who is homosexual to make a speech ($\chi^2=3.92$, $p=.048$) and to serve in the military ($\chi^2=4.15$, $p=.042$). While animal rights supporters were somewhat more likely to support the right of a person who is homosexual to teach at a college or university, the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2=1.59$, $p=.208$).

On the two questions that pertained to race relations, the two groups were identical in their response to the question about laws prohibiting marriage between blacks and whites; however, animal rights supporters were significantly less likely to agree with the statement that blacks should not push themselves into neighborhoods where they are not wanted ($\chi^2=8.13$, $p=.004$).

Discussion

These findings suggest that support for animal rights is related to other social issues, notably issues regarding gun control, acceptance of violence, and acceptance of diversity and rights for women, persons who are homosexual, and persons of color. People who believed animals have rights answered differently than people who did not share that belief on seven out of the eleven questions, generally reporting less tolerance for violence and more acceptance of human diversity and choice. It should be noted that the variables where no significant differences were found, particularly variables "teach" and "marriage," were not very discriminating.

While the measures of association on almost all of the seven items indicated the strength of the relationships was modest, and the causal direction of the relationships are unclear, these preliminary findings provide support for the assumption that the way people regard animals is related to the way they regard people.

Because only a single item was used to measure support for animal rights, and that item was not very discriminating (nearly three-fourths of the respondents agreed that animals had rights), this study does not identify the social opinions of strong animal rights supporters. Rather, it highlights the social opinions of a group opposed to animal rights.

Those in this anti-animal rights group, constituting nearly 17% of the sample, were more likely than other respondents to favor easy public access to guns, to oppose abortion rights, to exhibit racial prejudice, to be more approving of interpersonal violence, to blame the victims of rape and to exhibit prejudice against homosexuals, and less likely to give people with different sexual orientations a right to free speech. Demographically, this group tended to be older, Protestant and male and to live outside the urban area.

In their book, *The Animal Rights Crusade*, Jasper and Nelkin (1992) suggest that the moral sentiments of animal rights activists are largely independent of traditional political cleavages. While this study does not address that assertion, it does support the research by Kimball (1989), which found opposition to animal rights is closely aligned with political conservatism.

Overall, this research question has very important implications. To the extent that attitudes and behavior are related - a complex question - the possibility of a relationship between disrespect for nonhuman animals and disrespect for humans is an important one for clinicians, educators and policy makers. Future research should seek to develop questions about the level of respondent support for animal rights and should examine such views relative to important human relations issues, especially the acceptance of and tendency toward violence.

Note

1 Please address all correspondence to David Nibert, 834 Woodlawn Ave., Springfield, OH 45504.

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