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The Significant Life Experiences (SLEs) of Humane Educators

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Abstract

This study provides evidence of the significant life experiences (SLEs), which influence advocates for nonhuman animals to develop sensitivity toward animals. Thirty-nine humane educators participated in an online survey. Findings indicate that having a relationship with a companion animal in adulthood is the most important life experience, followed by having a childhood experience with an animal, being exposed to a positive role model in childhood, and reading about animals and animal issues. The study did not find age and gender related differences in life experiences. This paper compares the results from this study to two previous studies. The first study examined the SLEs of animal advocate leaders through analysis of autobiographies, biographies, oral histories, and written interviews. The second study examined the SLEs of animal rescuers through an open-ended survey. This paper discusses similarities and differences among these three groups.

Keywords

naturalist, ecologist, humanist, Significant Life Experiences (SLEs), animal advocate leaders, humane educator, empathy

Introduction

In the documentary film *The Witness* (LaVeck, 2000), the central character, Eddie Lama, grew up in a family that had a fear of, and an aversion to, nonhuman animals. He first interacted with animals as an adult while taking care of a friend's cat. Eddie began to bond with the cat and, as a result, started to view animals in a new light. Shortly after this incident, he was asked by a friend to foster an abandoned cat until a suitable home could be found. Eddie decided to keep the cat, and this decision changed his life forever. As he continued to bond with his cat, he began to question some of the ways other animals are

treated by humankind. As a result, Eddie now rescues cats and dogs and protests against fur on a regular basis.

How is it that some people, like Eddie, develop sensitivity toward animals? Regan, (2004) believes that animal advocates develop empathy for animals in one of three ways. The first he labels the *Davincians*, named after Leonardo da Vinci because he was a lover of animals. Davincians are defined as people who are born with a heightened sensitivity to other species, often displaying empathy for animals at a very early age. The second are called *Damascans*. These people are like Saul who, on the road to Damascus, experience a sudden and life changing shift in consciousness. They make sudden, and often drastic, changes in their beliefs about animals. The third are labeled *Muddlers*. These are people who through life influences experience a gradual growth in consciousness about other species.

Influences of Life Experiences

Eddie Lama's story portrays a person who Regan (2004) labels a "Muddler." His experiences with his cat influenced him to question his views about other animals. Eddie's development as an animal rescuer and anti-fur advocate is a compelling example of how life experiences can influence people to develop a deeper empathy for animals.

Kellert (1980) examined attitudes toward animals by surveying 3,107 individuals in the 48 contiguous states and Alaska. He identified their demographic characteristics and developed a typology of 10 categories of attitudes toward animals. Four of these categories involve positive orientation toward animals:

1. naturalist—appreciation for wildlife and the outdoors;
2. ecologist—concern for animal habitats and the environment;
3. humanist—affection for individual animals, primarily companion animals; and
4. moralist—concern for treatment of animals, including opposition to exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals.

Kellert (1980) found demographic similarities among all these groups. They tended to be young, female, highly educated individuals who held professional or clerical positions. In addition, they rarely—or never—attended religious services.

Arluke (2003) a recent attempt to understand how children develop humane attitudes within families. He interviewed 30 children, 11 to 16 years, who

attended a veterinary medicine program. The children's parents were also interviewed, for a total of 60 people. Five themes emerged from this study:

1. validating the importance of animals within the family;
2. parental teaching about, or encouraging, animal nurture;
3. identifying as an animal person, which involves empathy toward animals, and having a psychological and social link to animals;
4. seeing animals as helpers, that is, viewing animals as reciprocal friends or, in some cases, siblings, considering them support agents during difficult emotional times; and
5. assuming responsibility for, or worrying about, animals—often characterized by hypervigilance.

By examining the above studies, a clearer but incomplete picture emerges of what it means to be sensitive to animals. Regan's (2004) model demonstrates three methods by which people become sensitive to animals. Kellert's (1980) typology explains the kinds of people who are empathic toward animals. However, neither of these typologies helps explain how life experiences influence individuals to become sensitive to animal issues in the first place. Arluke's (2003) study shows how children learn and develop humane values in their families; however, it does not explore other life experiences outside the family, which may also affect attitudes toward animals in children. In addition, it does not investigate the kinds of life experiences that influence adults to become more sensitive to animals. To create a model for investigation of empathy toward animals, it is necessary to turn to the environmental literature.

Studies have been conducted on leaders in the environmental movement in an attempt to understand what motivates them to dedicate their lives to environmental issues. This literature examines the significant life experiences (SLEs) that influenced them to become environmentalists (Chawla, 1998, 1998a, 1998b; Gough, 1999; Joy, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998; Palmer & Suggate, 1998; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom, & Hart, 1999; Palmer et al., 1998; Sward, 1999; Tanner, 1980; Tanner, 1998a, 1998b). It was found the most important influences in raising awareness about the environment were frequent interacting with natural, rural, or other relatively pristine habitats and witnessing commercial development of habitats.

For most, influencing experiences occurred in childhood, involving incidents in nature and the countryside (Palmer et al., 1998). Family, other adults, and secondary education strongly influenced a developing appreciation for nature and sensitivity to environmental issues (Joy et al., 1998). A study that examined individuals in three countries found experiences in nature ranked highest, followed by (a) influence from other people; (b) receipt of information

about the environment in school curricula; and (3) information obtained from a job that involved environmental issues (Palmer et al., 1999). A study conducted in El Salvador found similar results. However, the second strongest influence was viewing environmental destruction either through war or land exploitation (Sward, 1999).

These studies offer a model to examine the question: What are the life experiences that influence people to develop sensitivity toward animals? To examine this question, I conducted three studies:

1. an archival investigation examining the autobiographies and biographies of animal movement leaders;
2. an open-ended survey distributed to people engaged in animal rescue; and
3. a quantitative survey of humane educators.

Study One: Biographical Accounts of Significant Life Experiences

To begin to find out the types of experiences that influence people to develop humane attitudes toward animals, I decided to conduct an archival study. By employing methodology used for historical studies outlined by Kumar (1996) and Morse and Field (1995), I read autobiographies and biographies of animal advocate movement leaders to find out the types of experiences that influence animal advocates to develop sensitivity toward animals. The autobiographies showcased three categories of animal advocate leaders, those who,

1. founded or directed animal advocate organizations, such as Jones (n.d.); founder of the International Society for Animal Rights;
2. wrote extensively about animals, such as the philosopher, Singer (1986); or
3. effected permanent, positive change for animals by working for new laws or for consciousness-raising of the public, such as Pratt (1987), founder of Argus Archives, a library and publishing house on animal issues.

I began the search by reading articles in the journal *Between the Species* (1986-1990), which provided 16 autobiographies and one interview detailing the lives of animal rights advocate leaders. These autobiographies depicted experiences that fostered sensitivity toward animals over the course of their lifetimes. I read the autobiographies and biographies with an eye for self-descriptive experiences that individuals believed to be pivotal in changing their consciousness about animals. Movement leaders described these experiences as helping them gain greater empathy toward other species and influencing their decisions to work on animal issues.

Additional reading sources for investigation into life experiences that generated empathy toward animals were from autobiographies and biographies, interviews, and a website. The Columbia University Animal Advocates Oral History Project offered 13 extensive interviews with animal advocate leaders. The British Library Sound Archive had 6 oral histories of animal advocate leaders. Additional sources were interviews with animal advocate leaders in *Satya* and *VegNews* magazines, the *Animals' Voice* website, and three books. I read a total of 43 autobiographies and biographies to determine which life experiences influence sensitivity toward animals.

To track and categorize these experiences, I created two Excel spreadsheets. The first spreadsheet listed all animal advocate movement leaders and the significant life experiences (SLEs) they identified as contributing to their sensitivity toward animals. Using data analysis methods devised by Miles and Huberman (1994) a content analysis of the biographies identified 16 SLEs.¹ This yielded the types of SLEs that the movement leaders described as strongly influencing their lives. The second spreadsheet listed all SLE categories tabulated on the first spreadsheet and indicated how many movement leaders chose each SLE. For example, all individuals who mentioned *reading* as an influence were listed under this SLE. This yielded the total number of animal advocate leaders who were influenced by each SLE.

Study Two: Survey of Animal Rescuers

The next step was to test whether other groups of animal advocates were also influenced by these SLEs. It was decided to query those who engage in animal rescue. Animal rescuers are defined as individuals who actively engage in rescuing stray animals from the streets.

Two types of rescuers were contacted. The first were those who engage in TNR (trap, neuter, return). TNR involves live-trapping stray cats, getting a veterinarian to spay or neuter them, placing them in adoptive homes or returning them to the original cat colony. There, they are fed by the rescuer or others. The second type of rescuers work at animal shelters and are involved in the daily management of stray animals.

The sample of animal rescuers consisted of 13 people living in the Chicago area: 11 females and 2 males. Three were the directors of animal shelters, one was a board member of an animal shelter, three worked at animal shelters in other capacities, and six were independent animal rescuers engaged in TNR and not associated with a particular organization.

I sent a one-page questionnaire to animal rescuers asking them four open-ended questions. Participants were asked to write a paragraph or two describing

the formative influences or events that helped them become involved in animal rescue. They were also asked to identify at what point in their lives these influences or events occurred. Specifically, participants received the following:

1. What are the formative influences or events that you feel helped shape you into a helper of animals?
2. What are the approximate number of years you have been involved in animal rescue?
3. Please include a brief summary of your animal rescue activities and accomplishments, and
4. What is your age? (Lewis, 2004)

Results indicated that experiences of animal rescuers were similar to the SLEs of animal-advocate movement leaders investigated in the archival study. The four most common life experiences that influenced animal rescuers to develop empathy for animals and devote their lives to helping them were

1. having a childhood relationship with an animal (54%);
2. reading about animals or animal issues (38%);
3. having significant discussions as an adult with friends, relatives, or acquaintances about animals (38%); and
4. having positive adult role models as children (31%). (Lewis, 2004)

The animal rescuer study also revealed a 17th SLE not mentioned in the archival study of animal-advocate leaders. One participant identified her job as a significant experience in helping her develop empathy toward animals. While working with animals, she became aware of their plight, which fostered her sensitivity toward them (Lewis, 2004).

Study 3: Humane Educator Study

For the next stage in investigating SLEs, I created a quantitative survey for the current study. The questionnaire was based on the SLE results from the animal advocate leader archival investigation and the animal rescuer study. This survey was distributed to another group of animal advocates: humane educators.

Method

I created a 17-item questionnaire using the 17 SLEs described by animal advocate leaders and animal rescuers and administered it to humane educators. Humane educators offer presentations to students and public groups on a variety of animal issues relating to proper care and respect for animals. I distributed the survey to a national sample of humane educators as a pilot study for a more extensive investigation into the SLEs of animal rights activists. The goals of the study were to help scholars understand what life experiences contribute to sensitivity toward animals and to assist humane educators in designing programs about animals and animal issues.

The population for the survey was drawn from three U.S. humane-educator listservs and was conducted online. I contacted each listserv twice by email message with the survey included as an attachment. The email message informed listserv members that humane educators were being surveyed on their life experiences as part of a school project. Humane educators were given the list of SLEs and asked to rank numerically their top three experiences as:

1. most important,
2. very important, and
3. important.

They were also asked two demographic questions: gender and age. Participants were asked to email completed questionnaires to the author.

The listservs were (a) Association of Professional Humane Educators, (b) International Institute for Humane Education (IIHE) and (c) SPEAK (Supporting and Promoting Ethics for the Animal Kingdom).

Members of the Association of Professional Humane Educators work at animal welfare organizations. Humane educators constitute about 75% of the organization's membership, with three-quarters of them in full-time positions.

IIHE has a large number of humane educators trained by the organization. Some of them are part-time educators paid by IIHE; others are part-time unpaid educators. Because IIHE does not collect demographic information on members of their listserv, it is possible that some members are not humane educators. However, the email messages informed IIHE listserv members that humane educators were being sought for the study and that this is the population who should respond to the survey.

SPEAK is a humane education speakers' bureau. All members of its listserv are part-time, unpaid humane educators. The total number of members in the

three listservs at the time of this study was 432, although some individuals may have belonged to more than one group.

Results

Forty-three humane educators responded to the survey. Four respondents were disqualified for completing the survey inaccurately. In all, 39 surveys were used in this study, consisting of 31 female and 8 male humane educators. Participants were residents of the United States, Canada, and Sweden.

Table 1 lists the 17 SLEs, the number of participants who chose each item, the percentage of respondents who chose each SLE, and the mean score and standard deviation for each response. The data indicate that four of these experiences were reported most often: experience with a companion animal ($n=25$, 64%), reading about animals or animal issues, ($n=18$, 46%); childhood experience with an animal ($n=16$, 41%), and parent or other adult influence in childhood ($n=11$, 28%). These findings are similarly supported by the mean scores. Having observed animal suffering, viewing media—a photo, TV program, video, or film of animal abuse—directly observing animal behavior, and having a job that taught one about animals were each identified by six responses (15%). The remaining items were identified by three responses or less.

Table 1. Means of Significant Life Experiences*

SLE	N	Percentage	Mean	S.D.
Companion animal	25	64	1.84	.80
Reading	18	46	2.33	.77
Childhood animal	16	41	1.88	.81
Adult	11	28	2.00	.77
Observed suffering	6	15	1.50	.84
Media	6	15	2.17	.75
Behavior	6	15	2.50	.84
Job	6	15	1.67	1.03
Caused suffering	3	08	1.67	.58
Conversation	3	08	1.67	1.15
Other Political Cause	3	08	2.00	1.73
Event	2	05	1.50	.71
Spiritual	2	05	2.50	.71
Life Crisis	2	05	1.50	.71
Unusual encounter	1	03	3.00	.

Table 1. (*cont.*)

SLE	N	Percentage	Mean	S.D.
Writing	0	0	.	.
Dream	0	0	.	.
Other	5	13	2.60	.55

* Respondents ranked SLEs as: (a) most important, (b) very important and (3) important. The lower was the mean (i.e., the closer to 1.00), the higher was the ranking.

Humane Educators = 39. Total SLEs = 117.

See Appendix for explanations of the significant life experiences listed in Table 1.

Table 2 shows SLE comparison results of the two previous studies on animal advocate leaders and animal rescuers with the current study on humane educators. All three groups identified childhood experience with an animal and reading about animals as highly important, placing them within their top four SLEs. Influence from other people, from an adult in childhood or from a conversation with a friend or acquaintance, was also found to figure prominently in all three groups. Table 2 also shows two differences. The first difference is that animal advocate leaders, unlike the other two groups, mentioned observing animal suffering as one of their top four experiences. The second difference is that humane educators chose influence of a companion animal in adulthood as their most significant life experience, while animal advocate leaders and animal rescuers did not choose it in their top four SLEs.

Table 2. Top Four Rankings and Comparisons of the Significant Life Experiences of Three Groups of Animal Advocates*

Advocate Leaders	Animal Rescuers	Humane Educators
Reading	Childhood animal	Companion animal
Observed suffering	Reading	Childhood animal
Conversation	Conversation	Adult
Childhood animal	Adult	Reading

* Leaders, N =43; Animal Rescuers, N =13; Humane Educators, N = 39. Total SLEs for each group are Advocate Leaders =134; Animal Rescuers = 32; Humane Educators = 117.

The humane educator study also examined age and gender in relation to SLEs. It was hypothesized that age cohorts would differ in life experiences. The reasoning was that younger humane educators would more likely be affected by media because of its influence on young people within the past 20 years (Brown, 2005; Bradshaw & Nichols, 2002; Mindich, 2004; Peiser, 2000). When examining the demographic data, it was found that age was not a statistically significant factor in determining SLEs. In this study, participants were grouped into two categories by age, younger (18-39) and older (40 and over). These two groups were then compared to the top four SLEs in this study. The results reported in Table 3 show no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Gender differences were also examined in this study. Table 4 shows gender compared to the top four SLEs. No significant differences were found.

Table 3. Mean Difference of Four Significant Life Experiences by Age

SLEs	<39 years			> 39 years		
	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Companion animal	15	1.87	.83	10	1.80	.79
Childhood animal	11	2.00	.77	05	1.60	.89
Adult	06	1.83	.75	05	2.20	.84
Reading	11	2.18	.87	07	2.57	.53

Table 4. Top Four Significant Life Experiences by Gender

SLEs	Female			Male		
	<i>n</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Companion animal	19	1.68	.75	06	2.33	0.82
Reading	16	2.38	.81	02	2.00	0.00
Childhood animal	11	1.82	.75	05	2.00	1.00
Adult	11	2.00	.77	00	0.00	0.00

Discussion

Humane educators compare favorably with the other two groups previously examined: animal advocate leaders and animal rescuers. All three groups ranked childhood experience with animals and reading about animals among their top four SLEs. All three groups also ranked within their top four SLEs

influences of other people—in childhood by a parent or other adult or in adulthood through a conversation with friend or acquaintance.

However, there were also major differences between humane educators and the other two groups studied. Humane educators ranked the influence of a companion animal in adulthood as their most significant life experience, while the other two groups did not choose this SLE within their top four experiences. On the other hand, animal-advocate leaders and animal rescuers chose conversation with friends as a top SLE, while humane educators did not. In addition, humane educators did not rank observation of animal suffering within their top four SLEs, as advocate leaders did. These differences suggest that humane educators are somewhat different from animal-advocate leaders and animal rescuers in how they develop sensitivity toward animals. As to why humane educators are influenced by a companion animal in adulthood more strongly and are not as influenced by conversation with a friend or observations of animal suffering is unclear. Perhaps future studies will shed light on these differences.

This study helps to build on the typologies developed by Regan (2004) and Kellert (1980) and the investigations of humane attitudes in children by Arluke (2003). Regan's model defines three processes people go through in developing sensitivity toward animals. Either they exhibit empathy toward animals at an early age—they suddenly wake up to the suffering of other species—or they gradually develop sensitivity toward animals. Kellert's typology, defined as naturalistic, ecologicistic, humanistic, and moralistic clarifies the types of people who are more likely to be sensitive to animal issues. Arluke's study expands on this line of research by isolating family experiences that generate humane attitudes in children. The data presented in this study investigate the types of life experiences that influence individuals to develop humane attitudes. By examining the SLEs of individuals who have already shown a commitment to animals, one can begin to understand the types of experiences that foster empathy toward animals.

This pilot study has broken new ground in examining the SLEs of animal advocates. Investigation of SLEs is important for scholars who seek to understand the types of experiences that help generate empathy toward other species. It also has value for humane educators. By expanding understanding of the types of experiences that are most effective in fostering empathy toward animals, humane educators can refine their presentations. In addition, this study also has value for parents who want to nurture empathy in their children. Additional research is needed to examine the SLEs of animal rights activists in order to compare their experiences with the three groups already studied.

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Note

1. The 16 SLEs discovered, in order of prevalence, were (a) read philosophy or animal advocate literature; (b) exposed to animal suffering; (c) influenced by a friend, acquaintance, or relative; (d) had a childhood experience with an animal; (e) influenced as a child by parent or other adult; (f) involved in other social justice or political causes; (g) influenced by a companion animal as an adult; (h) personally caused animal suffering; (i) influenced by video, television, or film; (j) had a religious, mystical, or spiritual experience involving animals; (k) faced a life crisis or life transition; (l) wrote about animals; (m) had an unusual encounter with an animal; (n) attended a conference, demonstration, or other event; (o) observed animal behavior; and (p) dreamed about an animal.

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Appendix**Explanations of the significant life experiences**

Explanations of the significant life experiences listed in Table 1 are included below.

Companion animal: A companion animal influenced me in adulthood

Reading: I read a book, magazine, newspaper, or animal rights literature

Childhood animal: I had a childhood experience with an animal

Adult: My parent(s) or other adult(s) influenced me as a child

Observed suffering: I was exposed to animal suffering committed by others

Media: I saw a photo or something on either T.V., video, or film of animal abuse

Behavior: I observed domestic, farm, or wild animal behavior

Job: I had a job that taught me about animals

Caused suffering: I once caused animal suffering

Conversation: I had a conversation with a friend, relative, or acquaintance

Other political cause: I was involved in other political causes

Event: I attended a demonstration, lecture, conference, or other event

Spiritual: I had a religious, mystical, or spiritual experience involving animal(s)

Life crisis: I faced a life crisis or life transition

Unusual encounter: I had an unusual encounter with a wild or domestic animal

Writing: I changed my consciousness about animals through writing

Dream: I had a dream about animal(s)

Other: (Other. Please Specify)