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Painfully Aware: The Effects of Dissonance on Attitudes toward Factory Farming

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Abstract:

We examine the moderating effects of cognitive dissonance on the persuasiveness of a message designed to influence attitudes and behaviors supportive of intensive-production animal agriculture, or "factory farming." Existing research on human attitudes toward nonhuman animals indicates that generic disapproval of their suffering gratuitously at human hands is a social norm. However, studies also reveal an absence of related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors seemingly implied by this stance. Such apparent inconsistencies may persist due to lack of awareness about and/or engagement with the issue of farm animal welfare. We used a two-group, between-subjects experimental design, and the subject pool consisted of 62 non-vegetarian university students. Following random assignment to either the commitment condition or a non-commitment control group, all participants received an informational booklet arguing for the prevalence of neglect and abuse in industrial animal agriculture. Commitment participants, however, first responded privately to a dichotomous, single-item questionnaire, either agreeing or disagreeing that "animals should not suffer needlessly in the production of meat." Given that the need to resolve or avoid self-contradiction can motivate attitudinal realignment, we hypothesized that an educational intervention would be more sympathetically received by individuals who had already volunteered support for its central premise, than by those never invited to adopt a stance. Results supporting three of four hypotheses indicated significantly heightened receptivity to an anti-factory farming message following commitment to a pro-welfare position. Commitment participants tended to be more open to eating less meat, concerned with the issue, and accepting of the message's basic claims. A fourth hypothesis was not supported: participants across groups were ambivalent about source credibility. We infer that animal advocacy efforts may more effectively generate public support for the cause by framing appeals to capitalize on what polls show most people already believe (i.e., that animal cruelty ought to be prevented).

Keywords: [ANIMAL ATTITUDES](#); [COGNITIVE DISSONANCE](#); [FACTORY FARMING](#); [HYPOCRISY INDUCTION](#); [MORAL DISENGAGEMENT](#)

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