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Are People More Disturbed by Dog or Human Suffering?

Influence of Victim's Species and Age

Jack Levin

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts

Arnold Arluke

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts

aarluke@gmail.com

Leslie Irvine

Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado

Abstract

This research examines whether people are more emotionally disturbed by reports of non-human animal than human suffering or abuse. Two hundred and fifty-six undergraduates at a major northeastern university were asked to indicate their degree of empathy for a brutally beaten human adult or child versus an adult dog or puppy, as described in a fictitious news report. We hypothesized that the vulnerability of victims—determined by their age and not species—would determine participants' levels of distress and concern for them. The main effect for age but not for species was significant. We also found more empathy for victims who are human children, puppies, and fully-grown dogs than for victims who are adult humans. Age makes a difference for empathy toward human victims, but not for dog victims. In addition, female participants were significantly more empathic toward all victims than were their male counterparts.

Keywords

empathy – emotional distress – vulnerability – suffering – victims – dogs – age

In the popular perception, media coverage of the abuse of non-human animals appears to evoke greater public outrage than reports of comparable mistreatment of human victims. When reports of non-human victims reach the media, the attention they receive can seem to overshadow concern for the traumas and tragedies that befall humans. For example, in February 2015, Harrison's Fund, a British charity that supports research for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, ran a fundraising campaign featuring two versions of the same ad. Both contained text that read, "Would you give £5 to save Harrison from a slow, painful death?" One version featured a picture of the real Harrison Smith, an eight-year-old boy diagnosed with Duchenne. The other featured a stock photo of a dog. When the ads ran on MSN's United Kingdom website with links to donate to the charity, the one depicting the dog attracted twice as many clicks as the one with the boy (230, compared to 111) (Lambert, 2015).

In addition, in 2014, after a pit bull dog mauled a four-year-old boy in Phoenix, Arizona, leaving him with injuries requiring years of reconstructive surgery, a social media campaign rallied a legal team and financial support to save the dog from euthanasia. Within a few weeks, a Facebook page dedicated to Mickey the dog had more than 40,000 "likes," while the page for the support of the boy had barely 500 (Tang & Billeaud, 2014). Critics might point out that Facebook "likes" depend on who shared the story and how, but this only proves the point. Advocates for the dog could quickly leverage social media to reach a wide audience of like-minded supporters.

Despite anecdotal evidence of apparent greater concern for non-human than human victims, it would be wrong to assume that animal victims will always elicit a greater degree of emotional distress and sympathy than will human victims of violence. Scholars have noted our society's inconsistent treatment of non-human animals and how this ambivalence translates into widespread indifference toward, if not approval of, their harm (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Herzog, 2010; Plous, 1993). Some people view non-human animals as property and treat them like objects; from this perspective, their harm would inspire little if any concern (Vollum et al., 2004).

Even if viewed as more than mere objects, the suffering of non-human animals still may not prompt as much concern as humans made to suffer similarly. Of course, views on non-human animals vary widely and are rife with contradictions (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). Studies reveal that numerous factors influence people's attitudes (Batt, 2009; Kellert, 1996; Plous, 1993). Anthropomorphized species, including but not limited to those commonly kept as companions, elicit greater concern than do other species. Phylogenetic similarity to humans; perceived intelligence; domestication; and neoteny, or "cuteness," also influence people's views. When it comes to the abuse of non-human animals

versus children, however, the former lags far behind the latter in terms of the willingness of society to criminalize the violence, intervene to stop it, and provide resources to help the victims.

Social science research has yielded mixed results in studies of empathy felt for non-human versus human victims. Much of the inconclusiveness likely stems from differing perspectives on the nature of empathy. Defined as “a vicarious emotional response to another’s emotions or states” (Paul, 2000, p. 194), some researchers depict empathy as one continuous capacity directed toward different targets (Eisenberg, 1988; Serpell & Paul, 1994; Signal & Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Signal, 2005). Under this framework, individuals who feel compassion for other people feel similarly toward non-human animals, and vice versa. Assuming that the same positive correlation holds for a *lack* of compassion, or for cruelty, the idea that a continuous emotion generalizes to different targets has implications for understanding a wide range of anti-social behavior, from animal abuse to violent acts directed at other people (Ascione, 1992).

In contrast, drawing on examples of how empathy for non-human animals does *not* generalize to humans, such as the Nazis (Arluke & Sax, 1992) and militant animal liberation activists (Monaghan, 1999), Paul (2000) proposed separate empathy constructs, with one capturing people’s response to non-human animals and another tapping a similar response involving human targets. Paul’s (2000) research found support for the presence of two types of empathy with some shared components, rather than a single, continuous mechanism.

Studies of human-animal interaction have also sought to locate the factors that underlie empathy. Yet, apart from finding gender differences, with females consistently scoring higher than males on attitudes toward non-human animals and measures of empathy (Angantyr et al., 2011; Herzog, Betchart, & Pittman, 1991; Matthews & Herzog, 1997; Phillips et al., 2011; Topolski et al., 2013), these studies have been inconclusive. Because many people have close relationships with companion animals, with some claiming to have greater emotional connection to non-human animals than to people (Archer, 1997; Bonas, McNicholas, & Collis, 2000), research has examined whether the relationship influences empathy. Here, too, the research offers no definitive conclusions. Although Paul and Serpell (1993) found an association between companion animal ownership in childhood and concern about the welfare of both humans and non-human animals, Paul (2000) later found a significant association between current or childhood ownership and empathy directed at animals, but *not* at humans.¹

1 We recognize the controversy surrounding “ownership” of non-human animals; we have used the term, as well as “owner,” where consistent with the cited literature.

Taylor and Signal (2005) found that current companion animal ownership, but not ownership in childhood, correlated with high scores on measures of human-human empathy. Studies by Signal and Taylor (2006) and Meyer, Forkman, and Paul (2014) found that ownership, regardless of life stage, had no effect on concern for non-human animals. In a study of children, Daly and Morton (2003) found that having companion animals *did not* result in significantly higher empathy. Daly et al. (2014) found that, while non-human animal companionship alone did not make respondents more likely to empathize with animals than humans, level of attachment to the companion animal did significantly mediate respondents' emotional response on behalf of animals. Respondents were generally more "bothered" by the victimization of a human infant than a puppy—with the exception of dedicated companion animal guardians, who were more upset by the puppy-abuse than any other group.

These and other studies focus on characteristics pertaining to the observers, or the person experiencing the empathy. The observer-centered approach seeks the antecedent factors—whether related to personality, demographics, development, psychological skills (e.g., nurturance), or lifestyle choices (e.g., being a vegetarian)—that might influence empathy (see Davis, 2006; Preylo & Arikawa, 2008). Research design may explain the mixed results. By comparing an observer's emotional response to a human versus an animal victim, these studies pit species against each other (e.g., Westbury et al., 2015). Doing so may falsely attribute greater emotional response to a victim's species—animal or human—when the response may be triggered by specific attributes of victims, regardless of their species. In particular, these studies fail to examine the effect of age of victim when comparing human and animal targets. In Angantyr et al. (2011), for example, one set of scenarios compares adult victims (a man, woman, cat, and dog), and another compares young victims (a child, baby, and puppy). In Daly et al. (2014), all the scenarios depict the "abuse victims" as young: either as puppies or infants. These studies require respondents to make choices between victims of different species but within the same age category.

A smaller number of studies consider age of the victim as an empathy trigger (Lehmann et al., 2013; Prguda & Neumann, 2014). For example, one study that incorporated age as a potential empathy trigger examined respondents' willingness to help any of three hypothetical target victims—a 6-year-old child, an adult woman, and a 40-pound dog—portrayed as under attack by an adult man (Laner et al., 2001). Respondents reported willingness to intervene on behalf of any of the victims, but children received the highest mean scores on intention to intervene. Scores for women and dogs, while lower, did not differ significantly. Although the study incorporated age as a potential empathy trigger, it still required respondents to choose between species.

The present study examines the extent to which people's reactions of distress to animal and human suffering stem from the perceived vulnerability of the victim, as characterized by youth. In doing so, we include two potential antecedents to empathy: current need, as depicted by an abuse scenario, and vulnerability, as characterized by the victim's youth. Although the empathic response is considered a response to perceiving another in need, the types of need that elicit empathy (i.e., whether someone is in current need of help or is in a vulnerable position) deserve greater attention (Batson et al., 2005; Lishner et al., 2011). Vulnerability can exist without current need; we can perceive another as defenseless even in the absence of potential harm, and doing so would not elicit empathy. Similarly, seeing another in need might not elicit empathy if that other were also seen as capable of resolving the situation without help (Midlarsky & Hannah, 1985).

Research also suggests that the empathic response arises from mechanisms that evolved to promote the care and protection of the young (Dijker, 2010, 2014; Lishner et al., 2008; Lishner et al., 2011). From an evolutionary perspective, a "parental instinct" generalizes to extend care and concern even to non-kin (Lorenz, 1971; McDougal, 1908). Informed by this view, and using age as an indicator of vulnerability, we hypothesize that, when reading about a violent act, young rather than adult victims, regardless of species, will elicit greater empathy.

Materials and Methods

Participants

All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in introductory sociology and anthropology classes at a major northeastern university. The approximate enrollment in these classes totaled 380 students; 240 students completed and returned the survey instrument. All participants were in the age range 18-23. One hundred and ninety-six were Caucasian, 16 Black, 19 Asian, and nine Latino. Some 172 participants were female and 68 were male. Only those students 18 or older were asked to participate. There were no other inclusion/exclusion criteria.

The university's institutional review board reviewed and approved this study.

Procedure

In a regular classroom setting, participants were recruited by asking the students present if they would participate in the study. It was made clear that

student participation was completely voluntary and their acceptance or rejection to participate would not affect their standing at the university or in the class. Before receiving the instrument, verbal informed consent was obtained and participants were given an explanation for completing the instrument. All data were collected during a regular class period. Both oral and written instructions indicated that all answers were to be treated confidentially, and that participants could stop at any time, even if they had already started the experiment.

To manipulate the independent variables, consenting participants were randomly given a fictitious newspaper article that described one of four vignettes (1-year-old infant, 30-year-old adult, a puppy, or 6-year-old adult dog) that detailed an attack perpetrated against the victim. The vignettes differed only by the identification of the victim. All other conditions remained the same. For example, our vignette for the puppy was as follows:

Please read the following article taken from the *Boston Globe*, October 16th, 2010: *BOSTON—After a noticeable increase of attacks against residents of certain Boston neighborhoods, Police Commissioner Davis has assigned a larger law enforcement presence to crime “hotspots” around the City. Last week, police investigators documented a total of 11 attacks on residents of the South End alone. According to witnesses present, one particularly vicious assault involved a one-year-old puppy that was beaten with a baseball bat by an unknown assailant. Arriving on the scene a few minutes after the attack, a police officer found the victim with one broken leg, multiple lacerations, and unconscious. No arrests have been made in the case.*

Dependent Variable

Participants were then asked to indicate their degree of empathic concern for the victim in the vignette by their responses on an Emotional Response Scale (Batson, 1987). The measure consisted of 16 emotions to which participants responded by indicating how much they felt each toward the victim whose account they read on a series of 7-point rating scales: for example, from 1 (not at all sympathetic) to 7 (extremely sympathetic). The list included six emotions—*sympathetic, softhearted, warm, compassionate, tender, and moved*—that have been employed in many previous studies to assess feelings of empathic concern (See Batson et al., 2005, 2007).

The ratings on the 16 scales were summarized to yield a total empathic distress score ranging from 7 (little empathy) to 112 (much empathy). The internal consistency of the overall measure was indicated by Cronbach's Alpha = .83. Notwithstanding its lack of explicit validity and reliability data, the Emotional

Response Scale has been employed in numerous studies and published in the most selective journals in social psychology, as a measure of empathy and personal distress (See, for example, Batson, 1991; Batson et al., 1981; Batson et al., 1983; Batson et al., 1986; Batson et al., 1988; Batson et al., 1989; Batson et al., 1995; Batson et al., 1997; Batson et al., 2005; Batson et al., 2007; Fultz et al., 1986; Lishner et al., 2011; Toi & Batson, 1982).

As a check on the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants were asked to recall the age and species of the victim from the vignette they had received. The nine students who gave at least one incorrect response were excluded from the study, leaving a total of 231 participants whose responses were subjected to analysis.

Debriefing

Once participants read one of the fictitious newspaper articles and completed the questionnaire, they were fully debriefed, thanked for their time, and asked to remain in the classroom for their regularly scheduled lecture.

Results

Data were subjected to a 2 (species of victim) \times 2 (age of victim) \times 2 (gender of participant) analysis of variance in which main effects and interactions were examined. Results indicated that the main effects for age of victim and gender of participant, but not for species of victim, were significant. More specifically, female participants ($M = 74.94$, $SD = 21.58$) were significantly more empathic than their male counterparts ($M = 69.28$, $SD = 20.91$), regardless of species, $F(1,224) = 4.34$, $p = .04$, $d = .28$. This result is consistent with the finding of an earlier study, in which females were found to be more distressed than males regarding victimization generally (Angantyr et al., 2011).

Not surprisingly, participants in the present study were significantly more empathic when the victim was an infant or puppy ($M = 78.22$, $SD = 15.80$) than an adult person or dog ($M = 65.99$, $SD = 20.90$, $F(1,224) = 20.23$, $p = .0001$, $d = .79$). At the same time the interaction between age and species also yielded significant differences, $F(1,224) = 12.70$, $p = .0001$, $d = .61$, but of an unexpected character. Based on Tukey's multiple comparison test, all of the age categories—infant ($M = 82.76$, $SD = 14.53$), puppy ($M = 75.34$, $SD = 17.06$), and adult dog ($M = 73.15$, $SD = 22.07$)—received significantly greater empathy than did the human adult victim ($M = 62.09$, $SD = 19.72$). Only in comparison with the infant did the adult dog receive significantly less empathy than other victims ($HSD = 8.85$). None of the other interaction effects were significant.

Discussion

Our results indicate that respondents were significantly less distressed when adult humans were victimized, in comparison with human babies, puppies, and adult dogs. Only relative to the infant victim did the adult dog receive lower scores of empathy. These results provide partial support for the assumption that people generally care more about non-human animal suffering than human suffering. More specifically, when confronted with hypothetical abuse, individuals report more distress over non-human rather than human victimization, unless a human child experiences the suffering.

There are two possible—and related—explanations for these findings, neither of which can be confirmed in the present study. First, the higher scores for the infant over all other victims are consistent with other research highlighting the importance of similarity between respondents and victims. The “perceived similarity” explanation maintains that people feel concern for others whom they perceive as similar to themselves (Batson et al., 2005; Krebs, 1975). Thus, species similarity could account for the preference of the infant over the puppy and dog, as in the study by Daly et al. (2014).

Second, the higher scores for the infant and the puppy suggest the importance of vulnerability, as conveyed by youth, in evoking empathy (Dijker, 2001). Perceived similarity alone did not evoke empathy: it did so only when combined with vulnerability. This is consistent with research suggesting that the empathic response evolved to promote the care and protection of the young (Dijker, 2010, 2014; Lishner et al., 2008; Lishner et al., 2011; Lorenz, 1971). Angantyr et al. (2011) support this explanation. Their study found that participants expressed the same degree of empathy for a baby as for a puppy. However, unlike the research by Angantyr et al., which looked only at main effects of young members of both species (or interactions with gender of participants), we were able to examine the interaction between age and species.

In addition, our results suggest that respondents were similarly concerned for adult dogs as victims. That is, only empathy toward the adult human was significantly lower than empathy expressed toward an infant, a puppy, or an adult dog. It may be that many people appraise dogs as vulnerable, regardless of their age, when compared to adult humans. In other words, dogs, whether young or adult, are seen as possessing many of the same qualities associated with human babies; they are seen as unable to fully protect themselves, compared to adult humans. Additional research could explore this further by asking respondents to rate the perceived vulnerability of the victims.

The vignette in which a human adult appeared did not indicate the victim's gender. In light of the traditional stereotype depicting men as dominant and

strong versus women as submissive and weak, it is conceivable that we would have found greater empathy for adult humans if we had specified the female gender of the victim. Future research might vary the gender of the human adult target to determine whether our results apply as well to female as male victims. In addition, examining correlations between the gender of respondents and victims would test the perceived similarity explanation by assessing the degree to which gender, along with species, influences respondents' identification with victims.

Indirect support for our findings comes from studies of how people regard their own companion dogs, some showing that people can consider their dogs, whether full-grown or puppies, as children or babies. For example, Greenebaum's (2004) study of "Yappy Hour" at Fido's Barkery showed that people attending this event on a weekly basis treated their dogs like children and regarded themselves as their dogs' "parents." In fact, Greenebaum's subjects did not view their dogs as animals, but rather as "fur babies," or family members alongside human children. Of course, not everyone will view dogs this way. People who have dominionistic relationships with dogs, for instance, have relatively low regard for their companion animals and value them primarily for protection, compared to people having a humanistic orientation that elevates dogs to the status of surrogate humans (Blouin, 2013).

With regard to the dog and the child being equivalent, this might also stem from respondents' differing perceptions of the vulnerability of the victims. As with a "blaming the victim" situation, respondents might view adults as responsible for and capable of removing themselves from the abusive situation; we expect the adult to walk away, as we would think we would do if in such a situation. With a young child or a dog, respondents might see them as unable to leave a harmful situation.

Of course, making similar attributions to both dogs and human babies also may depend on the specific dog breed. In our study, we did not specify breed in the vignettes. Future research might examine whether the "all dogs are babies" perception is breed-dependent by using vignettes that vary the identity of particular breeds of dogs. Prior research findings have been equivocal about the public's perception of and favorability toward different breeds, with some studies suggesting that people perceive different breeds similarly (Perrine & Wells, 2006), while other studies suggest differences (Budge et al., 1996). There might be less empathy for particular dog breeds stereotyped as highly aggressive, whose owners are also pictured as violent (Twining & Arluke, 2000). Although empathy was not directly studied, the respondents in Wright et al.'s (2007) research found that dogs seen as unfriendly and aggressive were less desirable and adoptable compared to dogs thought to be friendly and not

dangerous, suggesting that victimized breeds with the former characteristics might elicit less empathy than the latter.

Whether people have as much empathy for other kinds of victimized companion animals, such as cats or birds, let alone for wildlife, also merits investigation. While many people care about dogs (Plous, 1993), and perhaps other kinds of companion animals, not everyone is likely to have the same degree of empathy for dogs as, say, a squirrel, if the squirrel victim were similarly injured in a vignette. Here, too, as with dog breeds, there is variation in how the public regards various non-human species, heavily anthropomorphizing and perhaps having greater empathy for some species like dolphins or whales while not others, such as snakes (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Ashley et al., 2007; Herzog & Burghardt, 1988).

Experimental research has the advantage of giving investigators an opportunity to establish cause-and-effect relationships by manipulating their independent variables rather than by merely measuring the effects of variables post-hoc. At the same time, experiments including ours tend to have far less external validity than other research methods, typically including for investigation only a few of the many variables that might influence a dependent variable. As a result, it is usually difficult to extrapolate from the respondents in a single experimental study to any larger and more diverse population. We studied college students, most of whom were in their late teens and early twenties and white. Future research might seek to generalize to an older and ethnically more diverse population. Moreover, we excluded a number of variables that might have contributed to differences in empathy such as whether subjects were owners of dogs. Still, the strong internal validity of our experimental approach is a result of the random assignment of respondents to various categories of the independent variables, so that extraneous variables can be assumed to be distributed equally throughout the treatments and therefore cannot be held accountable for significant differences.

Conclusion

In terms of implications for policy and practice, the results of this study suggest an avenue for cultivating humane attitudes and potentially reducing the likelihood of violence toward human and non-human animals. The finding that perceived similarity, coupled with vulnerability, resulted in the highest scores among respondents offers persuasive evidence of the need to shift the scope of existing practices. We suggest that by emphasizing shared vulnerability,

rather than focusing on exposure to violence and aggression, innovative programs could reshape the treatment and prevention of animal abuse.

The incorporation of vulnerability has already advanced several other fields. For instance, in the literature on disasters, the “vulnerability paradigm” argues that characteristics of individuals and groups influence their ability to “anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact” of catastrophic events (Blaikie et al., 1994, p. 94; see also Irvine, 2010; Tierney, 2006). This perspective focuses attention on reducing risks beforehand, and not simply responding after an event.

Current research on medical education underscores the need for physicians and nurses to develop “a sense of what it means to be a vulnerable person, without necessarily focusing on illness” (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p. 709; see also Bochner, 2009; Hoffmaster, 2006). The process of incorporating a perspective on vulnerability into specific programs would vary widely, and the details extend beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, because acknowledging vulnerability means acknowledging similarity as embodied beings, similarly subject to harm and pain, it can have a potential impact on a wide range of moral and legal domains related, but not limited to, interactions between humans and non-human animals.

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