



Research report

Childhood pet ownership, attachment to pets, and subsequent meat avoidance. The mediating role of empathy toward animals



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ABSTRACT

Researchers studying childhood pet ownership outcomes do not typically focus on measures of adult diet, and those studying the psychology of meat consumption do not normally consider early experiences with companion animals. The present research sought to integrate these two areas by examining relationships between childhood pet ownership, pet attachment, empathy toward animals, belief in human–animal similarity, meat avoidance, and justifications for eating meat. Results from 273 individuals responding to a survey on an internet platform revealed that participants with greater childhood attachment to a pet reported greater meat avoidance as adults, an effect that disappeared when controlling for animal empathy. Greater childhood pet attachment was also related to the use of indirect, apologetic justifications for meat consumption, and this effect too, was mediated by empathy toward animals. Child pet ownership itself predicted views toward animals but not dietary behavior or meat-eating justifications. The authors propose a sequence of events by which greater childhood pet attachment leads to increased meat avoidance, focusing on the central role played by empathy toward animals.

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If we are to change the way people behave toward animals, we must first learn about the origins of that behavior in childhood.

—Alan Bowd, 1989

Introduction

In a time when nonhuman animals (for convenience, hereafter referred to as “animals”) are increasingly endangered in the minds and experiences of their human counterparts (Fawcett, 2002), it could be argued that the most frequent and meaningful action that many individuals take toward animals involves eating them. In spite of Bowd’s (1989) counsel though, researchers have generally neglected the developmental aspects of meat consumption and its most antithetical form, vegetarianism. Outside of parental diet, investigators have often failed to consider how childhood experiences may influence adult meat consumption.

The present study, then, aims to address this shortcoming and in doing so seeks to integrate two distinct areas of research. The first concerns how pets or companion animals influence children’s development, a topic gaining interest as some researchers have advocated a “biocentric” approach to development (see Melson, 2001, 2003). The second literature examines the psychology of eating

animals, a “blossoming” field of inquiry according to a recent review (Ruby, 2012). Despite generating increasing attention and having obvious relevance to one another, these areas have largely been treated discretely by researchers who tend to concentrate exclusively on one or the other. Those studying pet ownership outcomes typically do not focus on measures of adult diet, and those studying meat consumption do not normally consider early experiences with companion animals. The present research was guided by the assumption that childhood pet ownership, especially those relationships characterized by close child–pet attachments, would result in increased future meat avoidance because of the mediating role of empathy toward animals¹. It was also expected that those with closer childhood relationships with pets would endorse more indirect, apologetic justifications for eating meat and that this effect too would be mediated by empathy toward animals.

Because empathy toward animals was expected to unite the two literatures in question, it is useful to clarify its meaning before proceeding further with the rationale for these hypotheses. Borrowing from standard definitions of empathy (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987), empathy toward animals consists of cog-

¹ Of course there are many reasons why an individual may avoid meat including health concerns, personal disgust, etc. The mechanism proposed in the present research, empathy toward animals, is most relevant to those avoiding meat for ethical reasons involving animal welfare. There is the possibility that childhood pet ownership exerts later influence on meat avoidance via health concerns, but the present study did not test such a mechanism.

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nitive and affective components which respectively relate to recognizing and understanding an animal's emotion and sharing or having emotional responses in line with an animal's emotion. While not restricted to any particular emotion, empathy most commonly refers to emotional concern aroused by the suffering of another living being (Zahn-Waxler, Hollenbeck, & Radke-Yarrow, 1985).

Vegetarianism, reduced meat consumption, and empathy toward animals

The philosopher Lori Gruen (2004, p. 290) once noted that “when we begin to identify nonhuman animals as worthy of our moral attention because they are beings with whom we can empathize, they can no longer be seen merely as food.” That is, the process of empathy transforms abstract entities into living beings whose welfare cannot easily be ignored. Empirical research has corroborated that an important difference between omnivores and vegetarians lies in the expression of empathy. Not only did vegetarians demonstrate greater human-directed empathy than omnivores (Preylo & Arikawa, 2008), they also had higher brain activation of empathy-areas of the brain while viewing negative valence animal images (Fillipi et al., 2010). For many vegetarians, higher levels of empathy toward animals make it cognitively and emotionally difficult to justify eating them, especially given that most consumed animals originate from factory farming (Foer, 2009) which is associated with cruelty and suffering.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a lack of empathy may facilitate meat consumption. What researchers have labeled the “meat paradox” (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010) – our simultaneous love for animals and our love for eating them – is resolved through a number of strategies, chief among them to deny that animals have emotional and cognitive capacities. Meat consumption is greatest among those not believing that animals suffer (Rothgerber, 2012) and for those who perceive animals to be unintelligent (Ruby & Heine, 2012). Relative to vegetarians, omnivores judged animals to share less similar emotional states to humans for a variety of emotions, but especially secondary emotions (e.g., nostalgia, regret, etc.; Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011). Even more directly, experimental contexts reveal that eating animals, expecting to eat them, and even being made to think about certain animals as sources of food led to greater perceived human–animal differences (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010).

These motivated perceptions psychologically prepare the individual to consume animals and operate by requiring a lack of empathy toward animals (e.g., denying suffering, emotional capacity, etc.). Given that eating animal flesh is related to a lack of empathy toward animals, from a conceptual and practical viewpoint, it then becomes important to understand the causes and antecedents of empathy toward animals. The remainder of the introduction focuses on one of many possible causes: childhood pet ownership.

Pet ownership and empathy toward animals

The notion that childhood involvement with pets is related to more humane and favorable attitudes toward animals later in life is not a contemporary construction (Wells & Hepper, 1997). In fact, it was adopted as a chief principle of the humane education movement in the late 19th century (Finch, 1989). These ideas seem to have survived as currently, pets are more likely to be found in households with minor children than any other household (AMVA, 1997). In one study, approximately 90% of pet owners believed that pets were important for children (Horn & Meer, 1984); parents believe that pets engender more respect for all animals and higher levels of general compassion (Macdonald, 1981; Salomon, 1981).

There is little doubt that pets demand and receive emotional support, central to the experience of empathy. Across different age groups, there is evidence that children are emotionally expressive and connected to their pets. When asked who they would turn to in emotional situations or when wanting to share a secret, nearly half of a sample of 5-year-olds without prompt, mentioned a pet (Melson & Schwarz, 1994, October). An even greater percent (75%) of 10- to 14-year-olds revealed that they turned to their pets when they were upset (Covert, Whirren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). Bryant (1985) discovered that 7- to 10-year-old pet owners reported being as likely to talk to their pets about emotional experiences as their siblings. This should not be surprising considering that this group mentioned two pets on average when asked to name the 10 most important individuals in their lives, and pet relationships were perceived by elementary school children to be more reliable than those with friends and family (Bryant, 1990; Furman, 1989). Pets, then, are trusted sources of emotional expression for children. But this relationship is not merely one sided: Because they are dependent on human care, pets provide children the opportunity to learn about and practice nurturing for others.

Rost and Hartmann (1987) found that 75% of 8- to 10-year-olds had exclusive or shared responsibility for pet care, and 92% believed this to be an important or very important part of the relationship. Consistent with these findings, 12-year-olds spent more time caring for pets than caring for their younger siblings (Melson & Fogel, 1996). The opportunity to nurture one's pet was identified by Bryant (1990) as a benefit to childhood pet ownership. Because the ability to recognize, understand, and share the feelings of others is a necessary condition for nurturance (Melson, 2003), pets facilitate the development of empathy. Zahn-Waxler et al. (1985) even noted that animals are sometimes recipients of a child's first expression of empathy.

Cuomo and Gruen (1998) and Gruen (2004) take this reasoning a step further: They identified interspecies relationships and friendships as critical for developing empathy toward not only the specified pet, but toward all animals. They reason that because animals lack the verbal ability to communicate their concerns, humans must develop skills to understand them – without empathic awareness, humans would be in no position to understand an animal's needs and desires, their moods, concerns, etc.

Because humans are largely physically separated from nonhuman animals in the wild and those used in food production, it is difficult to develop these skills and cultivate empathy outside the context of pet ownership. This distance also makes it difficult for humans to feel compelled by the pain of animals unless one can imagine the suffering that would be felt by the animals with whom they share a relationship. Relationships with pets, then, provide opportunities to develop empathy and make it more likely that such feelings will extend beyond the immediate pet and onto other animals.

Such theorizing about the role that childhood pet ownership plays in facilitating empathy toward animals has received empirical support from Paul (2000). Paul (2000) found that empathy toward animals was significantly related to the current ownership of pets and to childhood pet ownership in a sample of 514 adults in Scotland. Because empathy may signify general concerns for animals, it follows that childhood pet ownership is related to more positive attitudes toward animals (Bowd, 1984; Paul & Serpell, 1993), positive attitudes toward pets (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1988), and with empathy toward pets (Vizek-Vidovic, Arambasic, Kerestes, Kuterovac-Jagodic, & Vlahovic-Stetic, 2001).

In short, empathy toward animals may be central to the experience of vegetarians and those trying to reduce meat consumption, and it may also be related to childhood pet ownership. This implied link between childhood pet ownership and reduced meat consumption has received indirect support from several sources. In

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