Can fiction make us kinder to other species? The impact of fiction on pro-animal attitudes and behavior

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the three studies described in this paper was to investigate the effects that reading fiction has on pro-animal attitudes and behavior. Although such effects have been widely claimed to exist by writers, activists and scholars, there has been scant experimental data to support that. In particular, there have been no experimental studies on the impact of fiction on attitudes toward animals over time and no experimental studies on the impact of fiction on behavior on behalf of animals. Our studies sought to address these limitations. Study 1 (n = 62) investigated the impact of a fictional narrative on attitudes toward animal welfare a week after exposure. Study 2 (n = 410) investigated the impact of that same narrative on attitudes toward animal welfare over the period of up to two months. Study 3 (n = 186) sought to establish whether that same text would have an impact on behavior on behalf of animals. All these studies were conducted in Poland on Polish subjects and with the use of texts written in the Polish language. While Study 1 yielded a positive result, the results of the remaining studies were negative. In conclusion, we discuss the practical and theoretical implications of these data.

1. Introduction

It is quite well-known that various writers and scholars have for centuries held that fiction – understood as 'prose novels or stories collectively' – can make us kinder to others (Scholar & Tadié, 2016; Hunt, 2007; Keen, 2007; Pinker & Goldstein, 2004; Pinker, 2011). But it is much less known that many of those writers and scholars have claimed this influence extends also to our attitudes toward non-human others, or animals. By way of historical example, within the nineteenth century's culture of 'sentimental liberalism' (Camfield, 2005; Pearson, 2011), fiction was commonly believed to be an indispensable tool for improving behavior and attitudes toward animals, and it was systematically deployed for that purpose by writers, activists, educators, and organizations such as humane societies (Boggs, 2013; Cosslett, 2006; Davis, 2016; Frevert, Eitler, & Olsen, 2014; Pearson, 2011; Pollock, 2005). Based on their perceived social impact, some such attempts might be even described as spectacularly successful. Consider, for instance, Anna Sewell's novel *Black Beauty* (1877) or Margaret Marshall Saunders's novel *Beautiful Joe* (1893).

As is agreed by historians, *Black Beauty*'s depictions of equine cruelty provoked such reactions in its readers that this eventually led to the outlawing of certain previously widespread practices that were abusive to horses (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Sewell, 2012; Chitty, 1971). It is precisely for this reason that the book has been often called "*The Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Horse" (Nash, 1989). *Beautiful Joe,* in turn, was so successful in fictionalizing an actual story of an abused dog that it became the first book written by a

Canadian author with sales exceeding a million copies and is said to have "defined the international movement that changed the way people treat animals" (Fiamengo, 2012; Saunders, 2015).

While sentimental liberalism may now be gone as a political culture, the memory of the impact of those two novels is still alive in some circles, and so is the belief in the profound power of fiction they have been held to illustrate. The practical consequences that *Black Beauty* had for equine welfare are mentioned in a wide variety of sources, from the book's Wikipedia entry to scholarly commentaries, and there exists a whole society dedicated to the heritage of *Beautiful Joe* (Dorré, 2006; McIlwraith & Rollin, 2011). Moreover, the capacity of fiction to improve behavior and attitudes toward animals is today posited by scholars in fields such as ecocriticism, animal studies, and animal ethics, as well as by numerous writers and animal advocates (Buell, 2001; Elick, 2015; Hogan, 2009; Regan & Linzey, 2010; Lima, 2015; National Humane Education Society, 2018; Vizzini, 2011).

It should be stressed here that the idea to employ fiction for that purpose is encouraged not only by historical examples such those of *Black Beauty* and *Beautiful Joe*. The existing psychological data, for instance, strongly suggests that fiction might be more effective in this regard than direct advocacy messages involving ethical arguments, statistical data, or documentary footage. This is because when people are presented with direct advocacy messages there is a considerable chance to critically scrutinize and reject them (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002), which is a common reaction in the case of such contentious issues as animal welfare (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; DeMello, 2012). But fiction is different in this respect. Typically it persuades not by presenting its readers with direct, explicit messages, but implicitly, through the perspective it encourages the readers to adopt and the characters and events it portrays (Appel & Richter, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000). For instance, it can, and often does, employ for that purpose detailed and emotional portrayals of individual suffering (human or non-human), and such depictions have been shown to be very effective in raising the public concern for mass misery, be it human or not (Slovic, 2007; Slovic & Slovic, 2015). In particular, they seem to be more persuasive in this respect than statistical information (Slovic, 2007), which is very often deployed in animal welfare campaigns. More than that, fiction is a kind of narrative, and narratives tend to be more absorbing for a reader than typical advocacy messages, thereby leaving less room for disbelief than the latter allow (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000).

Finally, fiction has an advantage over non-fiction related to the fact that many people find the topic of conditions for animals too distressing, or too uninteresting for them to be motivated to find out about it (Taylor, 2016). This is precisely the main reason why animal organizations have to go to extraordinary measures in order to draw people's attention to documentary footage of animal plight. They often use shock tactics and, sometimes, as in the case of the recent campaign Ten Billion Lives, they even offer financial reward to those who would be willing to watch such footage (Deckha, 2008; Elist, 2012; Munro, 2012).

No such measures would be necessary if they focused on using fiction instead because fiction is a kind of entertainment that can make any topic attractive to any audience, no matter how repulsive or uninteresting they might otherwise find it (Appel & Richter, 2007; Carroll, 1990). For instance, it is safe to presume that among the readers of Donna Leon's New York Times bestseller *Beastly Things*, a detective novel dealing with the horrors of meat production, there are people who would vehemently reject an invitation to watch a documentary footage on that topic. Yet they simply had to learn a lot about it if they wanted to follow the book's absorbing plot (Leon, 2012).

While all this sounds very promising, there is one major problem with the claims and hopes that fiction can improve attitudes toward animal welfare and stimulate related behavior. That is, they are all based on insufficient evidence. They all presume that fiction can have a genuine social impact in this respect: that it can influence not just a select few, but a wider audience, who will then change how they treat animals. But the data they rely on in this respect is mostly of historical, speculative, and anecdotal nature.

This is a problem because intuitions about causal relations sometimes turn out to be wrong when submitted to empirical scrutiny, even if they have been bolstered by such historical, speculative, and anecdotal evidence (Lilienfeld, 2010). What is needed for claims about fiction's capacity to make us kinder to animals to be sound is evidence from controlled experiments. However, such evidence is unfortunately almost completely absent, unlike in the case of fiction's impact on attitudes and behavior toward humans (Ellithorpe, Ewoldsen, & Porreca, 2015; Hakemulder, 2000; Johnson, 2013; Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, & Huffman, 2013; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010; Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012; Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti, 2015; Małecki et al., 2016).

In particular, there are no experimental studies on whether the impact of fiction on attitudes toward animals is lasting and on whether it can lead to a related behavioral outcome. These are important lacunae since all the large claims about the pro-animal impact of fiction presume that it is not fleeting and that it leads to concrete actions. Obviously, if the attitudinal change is gone as soon as we put down the book, and if it does not influence our subsequent actions, then, as far as social practice and policy making is concerned, it is as if did not exist at all.

This paper aims to fill the above limitations by presenting the results of three experiments: two that test whether the impact of a fictional text on attitudes toward animals can extend across longer periods of time (a week and a period of up to two months, respectively), and one which investigates whether the attitudinal impact of the same fictional text translates into a behavioral impact as well.

Note that the significance of these experiments extends beyond the fact that they provide an empirical test for the claims that have been made about the pro-animal impact of fiction by numerous scholars and writers across hundreds of years. They may also be seen as making a contribution to psychonarratology, or the empirical study of literary response (Bortolussi, 2003), in particular as far as the prosocial power of fiction is concerned. This is because the existing experimental data on that power is still rather scarce (and sometimes yields mixed results, Kidd & Castano, 2017), and because our experiments help to better assess its scope. Fictional narratives have been shown to positively affect attitudes toward stigmatized human groups such as Arab-Muslims, immigrants, African Americans, and homosexuals (Johnson et al., 2013; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Vezzali et al., 2012, 2015). But does this prosocial power of fiction extend also across species lines, beyond the boundaries that divide humans? If it could, this would be a remarkable