

Compact

Emmeline Cambridge

Exploring the Effect of Imagery and Categorisation on Belief in Animal Mind



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Abstract

Following the horse meat scandal of 2012 the concept of the meat paradox was created; engaging in the consumption of meat whilst simultaneously disliking hurting animals. The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that farm animals are denied mind in order to relieve negative feelings associated with eating animals. The present study explores the hypotheses that animals will be attributed mind based on their category. The effect of the presentation of the animal (e.g. text/image) on animal mind is also tested, as well as association between mind attitudes toward animals. 69 participants recruited using the Hanover social research website and University of Worcester research scheme completed this study.

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire followed by the attitudes towards animals scale (ATAS) and an animal mental capacity rating task (in either the control (text) or experimental condition (image) conditions). The animals formed a number of categories, including food and companion animals. A mixed ANOVA revealed no significant interaction between the presentation of the animal (word/image) and BAM. Presentation was also found to have no significant effect on BAM, despite a consistently lower average of BAM in the word condition. A significant effect was however, found for animal category on BAM, with the largest differences lying between companion animals and the other categories (pest, food, cold). Furthermore, there was no significant association between attitudes towards animal and BAM.

In conclusion there is a clear and well supported relationship between animal category and belief animal, which has been demonstrated for not only food animals, but also for pest and cold blooded animals. Future research should further explore the relationship various categories of animals and BAM.

In 2013, UK citizens were forced to consider the origins of their products when perceptions towards meat were challenged following the exposure of the horse-meat scandal in Europe. Tests revealed foods advertised as beef burger products to contain both undeclared horse and pig DNA. These contaminated products, in some cases containing up to 100% horse-meat (Morris, 2014) were sold by numerous retailers, including Tesco, Aldi and Iceland (Food Safety Authority of Ireland, 2013).

Questions were roused regarding perceptions towards different meat sources as consumers held the perception that they were eating products derived from pigs (pork) and cows (beef) (Persaud, 2013). The same individuals however, were disgusted at the concept of consuming horse meat “In Ireland, it is not our culture to eat horsemeat and therefore, we do not expect to find it in a burger” (Food Safety Authority of Ireland, 2013). This raises the question of the difference between conventional food animals such as cows, and other animals such as horses.

Furthermore, the nature of meat consumption in general was also explored, questioning why humans appear to demonstrate natural empathy towards living things and yet consume a product that demands the killing and suffering of an animal. It argues that the consumption of meat, itself, is paradoxical in nature - humans appear to demonstrate a natural empathy towards animals and when witnessing their suffering causes a significant level of distress. This contradiction of behaviour and beliefs has been dubbed ‘the meat paradox’.

There is an increasing amount of research surrounding attitudes towards meat and animals, perhaps reflecting a growing interest in the sources and quality of meat, as well as concern for animal welfare. A recent poll found that almost a third of respondents said the horsemeat scandal had “permanently impacted” the way they chose and bought food. (Morris, 2014)

This study aims to re-evaluate attitudes towards food animals in light of the recent focus in the media on farm-animal welfare and the sources of meat. By exploring the nature of the meat paradox and investigating the perceptions of food animals compared to other animals, this study builds upon previous research by introducing a new combination of variables and methodology. The extent to which animals are perceived to possess mental capacities, as the dependent variable will be measured and compared across two independent variables; type of presentation of animal (text/image) and animal category (e.g. food/companion).