3

Sheep in wolves' clothing? Attitudes to animals among farmers and scientists

JAMES A. SERPELL

Introduction and methods

Within the last 30 years, western attitudes to non-human animals and their treatment have undergone some revolutionary changes (see Midgley, 1994; and also see Chapter 11, this volume). Methods of exploiting animals that used to be accepted without question are now criticized on ethical grounds by growing numbers of people, and animal-related issues which were once considered the domain of small, idealistic minorities have become the subject of widespread public and political controversy. This remarkable change in moral emphasis is obliging certain sectors of the animal-using community to re-examine and justify their attitudes and activities towards animals in the face of mounting public criticism. This chapter describes how the members of two distinct animal-using groups – livestock farmers and research scientists – are responding to this kind of pressure.

In popular humane and animal rights literature, animal 'exploiters' are commonly portrayed as being simply callous or cruel. Such simplistic characterizations tend to reinforce feelings of dislike and distrust, while at the same time discouraging constructive dialogue between those on opposite sides of the debate. Indirectly, they therefore also constitute a barrier to improvements in animal welfare. The aim of the present study was to move beyond these stereotypic depictions to explore the actual attitude constructs employed by people involved in various consumptive, animal-using activities.

The material presented in this chapter was collected *in situ* (i.e. on farms and in laboratories) in the form of anonymous, recorded interviews with individual volunteer subjects. A small fraction of this material was then subsequently used in the production of a radio documentary.[1] Subjects

[1] 'Killers with a Conscience' BBC Radio 4, 28 October 1989 (producer: Miles Barton).

were asked about the animals they used and the practical aspects of their husbandry and treatment, and how they themselves felt about employing animals for such purposes. They were also invited to counter or respond to some of the typical arguments levelled against their use of animals by supporters of animal protection or animal rights. Interviews were open ended and were only discontinued when subjects considered that they had adequately expressed their attitudes and values concerning animals (see also Serpell, 1989). Only a small number of individuals were interviewed and, as volunteers, all of them were self-selected. However, since they were informed at the outset that the material they provided would be unattributed, there is little reason to assume that their statements and comments were biased or unrepresentative.

In the time since this study was completed, the results of a number of other more exhaustive and detailed attitude surveys have been published. These have explored attitudes among research scientists (Arluke, 1988; Gluck & Kubaki, 1991) and animal rights supporters (Plous, 1991; Herzog, 1993; Paul, 1995), but have not yet included analyses of livestock farmers' attitudes.

Results

Farmers

All of the farmers interviewed were somewhat defensive, and most of them showed a marked tendency to shift or deflect the blame for modern farming methods away from themselves. Critics of intensive farming were often accused of being out of touch with economic realities, and most farmers claimed that the only reason they reared animals intensively was because consumers 'demanded' cheap meat, eggs or dairy products. By implication, then, most of them would have preferred to raise animals more extensively, if only it were economically viable. In short, the consumer is ultimately to blame. Few of the farmers interviewed slaughtered their own animals, even for home consumption, and they therefore did not feel entirely responsible for their demise. Indeed, some specifically avoided inquiring too deeply into the fate of the animals once they left the farm. As the owner of a large egg production unit put it: 'I think they get turned into meat pies, but frankly I'd rather not know what happens to them.'

Without exception, farmers placed considerable emphasis on the health and productivity of their charges, as if freedom from disease, rapid growth, and high reproductive performance were entirely synonymous with good welfare. Many also insisted that their animals were actually quite 'happy',

and that they would be less happy – cold, uncomfortable, vulnerable to disease, more inclined to fight, etc. – if kept under more extensive conditions. They were also quick to point out that farm animals are 'better off' than wild animals, in the sense of being safer and more comfortable, and that they would not exist at all if not for farming. In this way, many farmers tended to cast themselves in the role of 'good shepherd', i.e. as protective and custodial agents, rather than as purely exploitative ones. A number also regarded themselves as guardians of the countryside and of rural traditions, of which livestock farming was viewed as an integral part. A few also argued that meat-eating, and hence meat production, is a part of 'nature' and the natural relationship between a predator and its prey. As agents of this process, these individuals saw themselves as serving the common interests of meat-eating society as a whole.

The farmers in this survey made certain efforts not to get to know their animals too well as individuals. On the larger farms this appeared to be relatively easy since it is impossible to get to know thousands of superficially similar animals individually. At this level of detachment, the animals, like sausages, can be abstracted to the status of mere units of production. The process is often reinforced by the use of euphemisms. In fur farming, for example, mink or silver foxes are typically referred to as a 'crop' which will eventually be 'harvested', rather than as animals which will be slaughtered and flayed. On more traditional farms and smallholdings, distancing devices (see Serpell, 1986) of this kind were less easy to maintain, and other, more subtle techniques were employed. Some farmers avoided naming the animals that were destined for slaughter (names, after all, signify personal status) or they were given special, often comical, names such as 'Mint Sauce' or 'Rashers', as constant verbal reminders of their ultimate fate.

Division of labour within the farming community undoubtedly helps to dilute the burden of individual responsibility. Most larger farms employ stockmen whose job it is to look after the animals and, as far as possible, get to know them and recognize when an individual is not doing well. These stockmen, however, play little part in determining the animals' eventual fate. Executive or management decisions of this type are usually made by the farm owner or manager who, conversely, has relatively little day-to-day contact with the animals.

Scientists

Similar attitudes were prevalent among scientists engaged in biomedical and behavioural research involving animals. Like farmers, many claimed

that they were only doing what society demanded but, in addition, biomedical researchers were also able to argue that their activities might actually improve health or save lives. Science therefore tended to be perceived by its practioners as a nobler and more self-righteous pursuit than farming. Most of the scientists interviewed were unwilling to claim that the pursuit of knowledge, on its own, was sufficient justification for using animals in research. Off the record, however, many drew attention to the difficulty of predicting the potential beneficial outcomes of basic, as opposed to strictly applied research.

In general, animals that were used for relatively harmless, non-invasive procedures were often named and treated like pets. This was particularly true of primates, dogs, cats and other larger mammals, especially if they were tame and co-operative. Conversely, scientists seemed to make conscious efforts not to become too attached to, or familiar with, animals that were destined for more invasive research, and smaller, less easily personified species, such as rodents, were more frequently used. According to Arluke (1988), this process of detachment; this objectification of the animal, is achieved in various ways. On grant applications, animals fall into the category of 'consumables'; they are often implicitly or explicitly defined as tools, instruments or sources of data, and they are commonly identified by means of numerical codes rather than names. The person conducting the experiment may also be reluctant to come into contact with a conscious animal, preferring to have it delivered either dead or already anaesthetized. Newcomers into a laboratory, such as research students and new technicians, may initially treat the experimental animals with affection and sympathy. But, often this is strongly discouraged by more experienced colleagues.

Among my informants, it was not considered unusual for one or two individual animals to be kept aside as named mascots or pets. By nurturing and personifying these selected individuals, it appeared that these scientists were in some way attempting to atone or compensate for their treatment of the animal's less fortunate, and more anonymous, fellows. Again, Arluke (1988) cites several examples of this type of behaviour. In one case, a group of laboratory technicians conspired to save the life of a rabbit, nicknamed 'Fat Cheeks', who was destined to be exsanguinated as part of an experiment. This involved covertly removing and storing blood from the animal over several days in advance, and feeding the rabbit up again between bleedings. Fat Cheeks was then falsely logged as being killed, along with the other rabbits, and secretly smuggled out of the lab. One individual I interviewed harked back to the days when stray dogs could be used for research, and admitted that the knowledge that these animals were

doomed anyway eased his conscience considerably. Arluke, on the contrary, found that most of his informants preferred the notion of purpose-bred laboratory animals – that is, animals whose sole function in life was to serve as experimental material. This difference between the two studies is probably cultural. In the United States, where Arluke's study was conducted, horror stories involving the discovery of stray or stolen pets being used for experiments are still commonplace and not entirely without substance (Clifton, 1992). In contrast, legislation in the United Kingdom has now rendered the use of non-purpose-bred dogs or cats for research virtually impossible.

All of the scientists in this survey emphasized how much they disliked the business of killing animals, and a surprising number were vegetarians. Euphemistic terminology was also widely used. Animals, for example, tended to be 'sacrificed' rather than killed in research. Arluke (1988) attaches considerable significance to the term sacrifice and it forms the main theme of his paper. He points out that, in a religious context, the sacrificial victim embodies the whole community. It is the object of identification, respect and even deification. In the realm of science, the experimental animal is also frequently represented as a substitute for a human being, a substitute that ultimately gives its life in order to further the interests and survival of the community. A simpler interpretation might be that the term sacrifice functions purely as a means of disguising or deodorizing the true nature of the act being performed (see Serpell, 1986).

As in farming, division of labour among researchers appears to be important. The scientists who design the projects and determine the experiments, often have little if any involvement in the care of the animals. He or she thus avoids getting to know them too well as individuals. Conversely, the technicians who look after the animals are not generally responsible for deciding their fate. Such divisions sometimes gave rise to a certain amount of job dissatisfaction among animal care technicians, particularly when the value of the research or the justification for killing the animals is not properly explained.

Although necessarily superficial, this brief account of attitudes to animals among farmers and scientists reveals a number of consistent themes. Above all, it suggests that farmers and researchers are genuinely ambivalent about their roles as exploiters of animal life, particularly in the present climate of rapidly changing public opinion. This ambivalence has not prevented these individuals from continuing to pursue their chosen occupations, but it does appear to call for the adoption of a consistent pattern of attitudes and values, some of which appear designed to deflect

criticism, shift blame or expiate guilt. The strategies commonly adopted include:

(a) denying or diluting responsibility, either via division of labour and hierarchical chains of command, or by 'blaming' consumers;
(b) filtering out or misrepresenting evidence of animal suffering;
(c) expiating guilt through compensatory acts of benevolence toward selected individual animals;
(d) maintaining a *distance* from the animal, e.g. avoidance of naming, or any other behaviour that might lead to the personification or sympathetic identification with the animal;
(e) disguising the fate of animals through the use of euphemistic terminology, e.g. 'harvesting' pelts, 'sacrificing' experimental animals, and so on;
(f) perceiving oneself as the agent of some higher moral purpose, e.g. saving lives, serving human interests, preserving the countryside, and so on.

Discussion

In the field of social psychology, it is widely recognized that humans tend to apportion their social and moral obligations according to how 'close' or similar others are to themselves (Deaux & Wrightsman, 1984). Thus people are more inclined to behave altruistically towards those who are familiar or related, for example, friends, neighbours, kinsmen, etc., and are proportionately less inclined to treat these individuals in harmful ways. Conversely, people tend to feel less inhibited about harming more distant categories of individual, such as strangers or foreigners. At the same time, an individual's perceived social distance is rarely immutable. As a result of social contact, interaction and observation, there is an inevitable tendency for distant categories of individuals to drift closer to oneself. Familiarity, in this case, breeds sympathy rather than contempt. And, one obvious implication of this process is that, if Jack ultimately intends to harm Jill, he must either have some way of absolving himself of responsibility for his actions, or he must take steps to prevent Jill becoming too familiar in the first place.

The results of the present survey suggest that similar rules apply to animals, although the criteria people use for deciding whether an animal is close or distant are evidently more complex. Feelings of affinity with animals, for example, may be based on superficial resemblances or 'cute-

ness' (e.g. giant pandas), actual biological resemblances (e.g. chimpanzees), apparent intelligence (e.g. cetaceans); recognition of similar feelings, motivations and needs (itself a product of familiarity), rewarding social relationships (e.g. pets), and various admirable qualities, such as beauty or physical prowess, with which people identify or wish they possessed (Burghardt & Herzog, 1989; Kellert, 1989; Serpell, 1990). Any, or all, of these criteria may qualify animals for quasi-human status, thereby creating a need for ways of distancing them and/or legitimizing their harmful treatment. As Rothschild (1986) points out: 'just as we have to depersonalize human opponents in wartime in order to kill them with indifference, so we have to create a void between ourselves and the animals on which we inflict pain and misery for profit.' Judging from the views expressed in this survey, farmers and scientists confront this problem on a regular basis, and respond to it in the predicted way: first, by denying sole responsibility for their actions towards the animals in their care, and secondly, by maintaining a certain physical, emotional or conceptual distance from them. In addition, acts of kindness towards selected individual animals may help to expiate a certain amount of guilt, and it is clearly important for both groups to see themselves as agents of the common good.

These findings may also contain some lessons for those seeking improvements in the treatment of animals in society. Confronted by the resistance of the animal-using establishment, supporters of animal protection have a strong tendency to resort to strident and simplistic accusations of cruelty, complacency or greed. Although occasionally justified, such allegations are often misplaced and frequently counter-productive. Irrespective of the moral rights or wrongs of animal exploitation, it is normal and appropriate for people to strive for consistency between their attitudes and their behaviour, and to resist attempts to contradict or undermine these constructs, particularly when their livelihoods are at stake (Festinger, 1957). It would therefore be unreasonable to expect farmers, scientists or any animal-using group to abandon their carefully constructed attitudes and values overnight or without a struggle. Furthermore, many of those who participated in the present survey were brought up and trained at a time when less critical views on animal use prevailed, added to which the fact remains that the bulk of their professional activities are still tacitly endorsed by a majority of the general public. The superior or sanctimonious moral tone commonly adopted by members of the animal protection movement is not only unlikely to prove effective in changing such attitudes, it is in danger of producing the obverse effect: of polarizing the debate still further, and driving animal-using groups into even more entrenched and oppositional positions. In the light of these considerations, campaigners on behalf of animals may achieve greater success by tailoring their arguments and strategies sympathetically to take account of the unavoidable professional and psychological difficulties confronted by those whose behaviour they seek to change.

References

Arluke, A. (1988). Sacrificial symbolism in animal experimentation: object or pet? *Anthrozoös*, **2**(2), 98–117.

Burghardt, G. M. & Herzog, H. A. (1989). Animals, evolution and ethics. In *Perceptions of Animals in American Culture*, ed. R. J. Hoage, pp. 129–51. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Clifton, M. (1992). Pet theft: can we stop it? *The Animals' Agenda*, April 13–18.

Deaux, K. & Wrightsman, L. S. (1984). *Social Psychology in the 80s*, 4th edn. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.

Festinger, L. A. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gluck, J. P. & Kubaki, S. R. (1991). Animals in biomedical research: the undermining effect of the rhetoric of the besieged. *Ethics and Behavior*, **1**, 157–73.

Herzog, H. A. (1993). 'The movement is my life:' the psychology of animal rights activism. *Journal of Social Issues*, **49**, 103–19.

Kellert, S. R. (1989). Perceptions of animals in America. In *Perceptions of Animals in American Culture*, ed. R. J. Hoage, pp. 5–24. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Midgley, M. (1994). Bridge-building at last. *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*, ed. A. Manning & J. A. Serpell, pp. 188–94. London & New York: Routledge.

Paul, E. S. (1995). Us and them: scientists' and animal rights campaigners' views of the animal experimentation debate. *Society and Animals*, **3**, 1–21.

Plous, S. (1991). An attitude survey of animal rights activists. *Psychological Science*, **2**, 194–6.

Rothschild, M. (1986). *Animals and Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Serpell, J. A. (1986). *In the Company of Animals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Serpell, J. A. (1989). Attitudes to animals. *The Status of Animals*, ed. M. Palmer & D. Paterson, pp. 162–6. Wallingford: CAB International.

Serpell, J. A. (1990). All the King's horses. *Anthrozoös*, **3**, 223–5.