

Case Exploration: Why do Children Eat their "Friends"?

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Abstract

Animals are depicted in a variety of media outlets as happy, friendly, and akin to humans. From games to books to movies, individuals-specifically children-are taught to care for, cherish, and possess empathy for animals. Children grow up to eat the same animals they were taught to regard as friends. How do young children navigate this juxtaposition of both loving and eating animals? I considered two possible answers to why children justify eating animals: There is an internal disconnect between what is on a child's plate and what they perceive to be an animal (cognitive dissonance from what children see), and there are external pressures and signs that cause a child to either accept or not question this juxtaposition (cognitive dissonance stemming from what an environment teaches a child). After reviewing this research and associated readings, parents, schools, and policymakers alike should be concerned about the perception of animals in young minds.

Keywords: Children • Animals • Food • Cognitive dissonance

Introduction

Animals are depicted in a variety of media outlets as happy, friendly, and akin to humans. From games to books to movies, individuals-specifically children-are taught to care for, cherish, and possess empathy for animals. In the words of Disney's Finding Nemo, "Fish are friends, not food" [1]. Even the act of pet ownership portrays animals in a positive light as shown by how children benefit socially, develop empathy, and gain more positive attitudes toward pets from these interactions [2]. Early positive incorporation of animals into different mediums should increase childhood empathy for animal welfare that transitions into adulthood because these relationships to animals enhance human animality that binds individuals not only to each other but also to other species [3]. However, children grow up to eat the same animals they were taught to regard as friends. How do young children navigate this juxtaposition of both loving and eating animals?

In this study, I considered two possible answers to why children justify eating animals: There is an internal disconnect between what is on a child's plate and what they perceive to be an animal (cognitive dissonance from what children see), and there are external pressures and signs that cause a child to either accept or not question this juxtaposition (cognitive dissonance stemming from what an environment teaches a child). In my result section, I found that family, friends, and school culture all contribute to the internal disconnect we see in children and their perception of the meat and dairy industry and that it is cognitive dissonance arising from their educational and home environments that cause children to not interpret the animals they see represented in the media as the same animals they consume on a day-to-day basis. I go on in my discussion section to recommend two policies to address this problem which are normalizing animal agriculture in early education and encouraging adults, specifically parents, to discuss animal husbandry. Future areas of research could involve analyzing the evolution of animal perception from childhood to adulthood and how animal representation in the media transforms either due to a change in media or society.

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Literature Review

Animal exposure, representation, and influence in children

"Children don't seem to mind the presence of informative material transformed from a completely human point of view" [4].

Humane education-education employing animal and nature-related content and activities-has long been used to promote prosocial behavior in children and is compulsory in schools across several U.S. states [5]. The use of humane programs is regarded as essential in teaching children moral virtues and to oppose cruelty by utilizing interactions with animals to teach such values [6]. Many argue that if such programs are not used, a tradition of tormenting and killing other animals will harden children's hearts even towards other humans [7]. Through humane programs, many children in the United States experience farms, and animal representation in farms, with field trips typically organized by their school. After World War II, the focus on a practical, safe, and economically efficient food supply lead to the industrialization of animal production [8]. However, it is important to note that the field trips used in humane programs are typically to local farms as opposed to factory farms. For many students, these field trips spark an appreciation for dairy farming [9], and as such, these trips persuade children to view farms in a more positive light and to see processes like dairy and meat farming as essential.

In addition to exposure to animals through humane programs, children view an array of animal representations in the media and often characterize such animals according to their portrayal. Animals are seen in the scope of human moral values (good, evil, lazy) and are depicted as such in Hollywood films (e.g., The Lion King), circuses, children's books, songs, and other popular cultural forms [10]. Additionally, animals are oftentimes characterized by companies who use animals as their mascot or for marketing purposes. For instance, Donkey, a craft beer company, uses a donkey to imply that its product is individualistic, uncompromising, and pungent [11]. Animal representation permeates children's media diets whether through school programs, media, or advertising.

Alongside animal representation in the media, research shows that peer modeling has a large impact on child perception of animals. Fear is instilled in an individual through at least three major pathways: conditioning, vicarious acquisition, and transmission of information [12]. Therefore, the influence of classmates or other peers can be used to instill a certain depiction or even fear of animals into children. Positive peer modeling causes children's fear beliefs and avoidance tendencies towards animals to decrease significantly while negative modeling causes children's fear beliefs to increase significantly to the animals used in the model and not at all for the non-modeled animals [13].

Despite the overwhelming positive incorporation and portrayal of animals

in the media and their representations, children continue to digest the species they should be empathetic to. According to a 2018 Gallup poll, about 5-10% of all people in the U.S. are vegetarian, with 5% of those being adults and the rest children [14]. As of 2003, more than 28 million children receive meals daily in public and private schools through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs which supply meat, poultry, dairy products, fruits, and vegetables [15]. Organizations such as the United States Fish and Wildlife Service convince the public that meat is an essential part of the American diet and that eating less or using substitutes is ineffective and harmful to them [16]. There is a conflicting representation of animals as they are depicted in the media versus on a plate. How do people-specifically children-coincide these conflicting portrayals?

Possible explanations/theories

There may exist an internal disconnect between what is perceived to be an animal and what is seen as meat that could justify the lack of empathy for the food on a child's plate that is present for an animal in another medium. This internal disconnect can be associated with cognitive dissonance, which is defined as when an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors do not align and are inconsistent, and this disassociation of beliefs and actions is prevalent in both adults and children [17]. For a child to learn new information and develop cognitively, it is imperative that children ask questions and receive informative answers to their questions [18]. If a child does not ask their parents, teachers, etc. about what they are eating, likely, such a topic will not be discussed, and young children will not make the connection that what they are eating is the same animal they were interacting with either through films, books, games, etc. In this manner, what children see and experience as animals in the media is not an accurate representation of animal lifestyles and the meat industry.

Furthermore, animal products will contain images of animals in peace or bliss, confusing the perception of the meat and dairy industry. Product marketing creates a story of coherence between nature, the production process (farm, animal), and the end product, making it seem as though the lives of factory-farmed animals are spent in nature and that their products are green, eco-climate, and animal friendly [19]. The misrepresentation of these products aims to convince customers that the meat and dairy industry are more wholesome than they might otherwise be perceived with accurate product portrayal. In this manner, the cognitive dissonance seen in children is caused by the inaccurate depictions of the meat industry through media (what children themselves see is what is contributing to their cognitive dissonance).

A competing explanation to explain the behavior of children can be found in the way they are taught by their parents, teachers, and/or other individuals in their environments. Adults are sometimes not receptive to information that troubles them or challenges their beliefs and actions: a concept referred to as carnism. Carnism is oftentimes used to allow people to deny animal suffering caused by the dairy and meat industry processes to legitimize their consumption of animals and animal products [20]. People will turn away from their atrocities because society has conditioned them to do so and because the pain of acceptance is sometimes too great a burden to carry [21]. If a parent justifies their consumption of animal products, it is unlikely that they will teach their child to do differently. Moreover, a study on plant-based milk found that parental consumption patterns had a significant influence on the consumption patterns of their children [22]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the teachings of parents or other parental figures in a child's life hold a substantial influence on that child's beliefs and could be a contributor to a child's cognitive dissonance.

In addition, schools do not prioritize teaching students about animal husbandry, agriculture, or climate change (including farming practice contributions to climate change). By the 1990s, a mere 2% of activities in 14 different English textbooks addressed environmental issues, with over half not involving any student participation [23]. Although the Smith-Hughes Act [24], introduced in 1917, provided federal aid to states to promote vocational education in agricultural and industrial trades and home economics, participation in the programs rarely reached 20% of students [25]. Today, only a little over 800,000 students participate in formal agricultural education programs offered in grades seven through adult [26]. The lack of proper instruction and importance placed

on instruction in animal agriculture contributes to the cognitive dissonance children may experience in their association with animals and food.

While the perception of animals in children has been extensively studied and researched, there is less information over the effect of this perception on academic and social success. Most recently, there was a study over the effect of different versions of an animal companion system on student learning perception by comparing different types of learning systems in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Researchers found that having an animal companion system was beneficial to students' attention, emotion, and perceived interaction [27]. Additionally, animal-directed empathy encourages the development of empathy toward people and improves children's interactions with their peers [5]. Despite the benefits to both school and home life that arise from the introduction of animals into education, children continue to possess cognitive dissonance due to either internal (what they see) or external (what others teach them) factors.

Finding the answer (methodology and results)

Through a brief survey released on social media to close family, friends, and peers, data was gathered over survey participants' childhood perceptions of animals and how they potentially explain both love and disregard for animal welfare. By leaving the questions open-ended, data over which of the proposed hypotheses above explains the juxtaposition of both loving and eating animals as seen in children could be gathered. Of course, such data is limited in both its scope and accuracy. Furthermore, the hippocampus, the portion of the brain used to store memories, matures enough for palpable recollections at 3.5 years old [28]. Even after maturing, there are limitations on memory that cause the earliest recollections of individuals to change and cement only by about age ten, with memories from age three and under being questionable in their validity [29]. Additionally, the rate of forgetting is not linear, but rather logarithmic, leveling out at about a 20% retention rate when a month or more has passed from the time of the event [30]. For these reasons, it should be noted that responses may be inaccurate or misrepresentative due to the scope and limitations on memory recollection.

Fourteen individuals completed the survey with 78.6% of respondents being female and 21.4% being male. Age was scattered with a concentration of 71.8% being age eighteen, 21.4% being age nineteen, and 7.1% being age ten. Of those who completed the survey, 21.3% were international and 78.7% were domestic. Further data collected from the survey can be found in the appendix listed after the references at the end of the paper. For the sake of space and time, only certain pieces of information will be highlighted when discussing the results of the study below.

When asked about respondents' earliest memory of eating animals, responses varied from being exceedingly vague (i.e. "very young") to slightly less vague (i.e. "3", "4", "Maybe 5"). This suggests that similarly to what was described earlier, respondents suffer from a limitation on their memory recollection that does not allow them to recall when they specifically first had meat or other memories from around that age. Moreover, various responses included references to chicken (or other forms of chicken like chicken nuggets) and family (including family events like roasts, parties, etc.). All of the respondents indicated that they had played/watched/read something about animals when they were ten or younger, and when asked to indicate how animals were portrayed in these mediums, the most common responses stated that the animals were depicted as happy, friendly, cute, human-like, and caring. Only 21.4% of respondents answered that they remembered their parents talking to them about animals, and 14.3% of respondents were not sure, with the remaining respondents answering that they had not recalled their parents speaking about animals to them. All respondents consumed either meat, dairy, or both products at age ten and younger. Finally, after expressing whether or not respondents would say they loved animals at age ten and younger (of which 71.4% said yes, 14.3% said no, and 14.3% said they were not sure), those who completed the survey were asked the question: "How do you think young children navigate the juxtaposition of both loving and eating animals? If you said yes to the previous question and also consumed meat and/or dairy products as a child, how did you justify your actions?" As expected, many respondents referenced cognitive dissonance and how they did not think to

question the source of their meat; however, many respondents also stated that they believed that adults, friends, and the education system failed to focus or mention topics related to food and animal consumption. Two responses that embody these ideas are given below:

"As is the case with most experienced children, many likely had to engage in heavy and unconscious compartmentalization of their passions and interests (i.e. animals) with their edible preferences (hot dogs, ice cream, etc.). It's likely that most kids don't put two and two together, instead focusing on their love for animals and their enjoyment of animal-based food rather than on the ways the two areas might be connected." "I think perhaps we didn't connect the animals we saw to the meat on our plate, like theoretically, we knew they were animals, but we didn't really think about how they were once alive and how they were killed (I also think adults shy away from telling children about these topics since they are quite graphic)."

From the information gathered above, it is much more likely that—as opposed to a disconnect created by the child—the cognitive dissonance seen in children that causes them to both consume and love animals is a result of the teaching (or lack thereof) of animal agriculture by parents. Alongside the evidence from the survey, there have been previous studies where it was found that the mechanisms underlying cognitive-dissonance reduction are prevalent in children [31]. This means that children are able to combat cognitive dissonance and avoid dissonant cognitions. For those reasons, I have determined that as opposed to cognitive dissonance created by what children see, the paradox of viewing animals as both companions and food arises from the influences of a child's environment and what others, specifically parents, teach them.

Other Possibilities

The other possible explanation to the reason why children can both love and eat animals that was explored in an earlier section of the paper is that they understand that while they may love an animal, society is unable to perceive animals as a whole on the same level as humans; therefore, it is easier to accept that animals are eaten than to become a vegan/vegetarian and watch others eat your friends. In other words, the cognitive dissonance children possess is not from what they are taught, but rather from what they see. As urban society grows "animals are either kept invisible, but still eaten, or elevated to the status of humans and therefore cannot be eaten" [32]. In this explanation, children see the conflicting representations of animals and learn to accept this juxtaposition. While this explanation is compelling, it is not supported by the study performed above, in which 71.4% of respondents indicated that no one had tried to justify animal consumption to them or that they were not sure (see Figure 6 in Appendix). If no one had tried to justify animal consumption, it is likely that the respondents had never noticed the conflicting portrayals of animals and questioned these depictions in the first place.

Discussion, Future Outlook, and Policy Recommendations

More than in the habitats of humans, animals are much more likely to appear as representations in various forms of media [11]. While children view animals depicted as happy, cute, friendly, human-like, etc. in films, books, advertisements, and other forms of media, they continue to consume these animals that are portrayed as either friends or equals. This paper examined research as to why there existed this juxtaposition in children's actions and beliefs. From outside observations and data collected through the survey above, it is evident that it is the lack of agricultural education from family, friends, and schools regarding animals that causes this cognitive dissonance seen in children.

Other scholars have analyzed the association between childhood beliefs, values and actions, and animals; however, none have explained the importance or connection of this association with the dietary choices of children. In the future, it will be equally important to examine the implication of this research on how future media representations of animals should be developed, especially

how nonhuman animal rights media should be altered to gain more presence in a younger audience. Currently, as the American Nonhuman Animal rights movement gains traction, activist representations are seen as mostly white, female, and thin, leading to a lack of diversity that has caused the movement to fail to resonate with other disadvantaged groups and anti-oppression movements [33]. If the characterization of animals in movies, novels, art, etc. is a key factor in the development of the animal in a child's mind, then it is vital to discuss how this characterization can be improved upon or changed to better the lives of animals, the environment, and people. Therefore, a further look into this discussion is of the utmost importance to researchers who hope to redefine animal rights and further animal welfare movements. Another interesting topic to be explored could be how animal perception evolves from childhood to adulthood or how the symbolic representations of animals in the media have transformed over time or changed due to societal norms.

After reviewing this research and associated readings, parents, schools, and policymakers alike should be concerned about the perception of animals in young minds. Alterations in the way animals are presented can benefit parents in that they no longer need to impose a disconnect from the perspective of animals as friends in the minds of children. In addition, schools should move away from sensationalizing farms to depicting the meat and dairy industry more accurately. From normalizing animal agriculture in education to having it be common practice to discuss this topic with children, it is up to policymakers to make these issues of conflicting animal representation more well-known, so children do not have to eat their "friends".

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