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Exploring Dominant Narratives About Other Animals

Research Report

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Summary of findings

This report details qualitative data analysis from 11 UK-based focus groups exploring 'Opinions on animals' roles in society', which found 7 dominant narratives in public thinking:

1. Necessity
2. Rationalisation of meat consumption
3. Anthropocentrism
4. Hierarchy
5. Economy
6. Welfare
7. Animal sentience

Key insights and recommendations for animal freedom communicators

Participants believed that some types of animal use were necessary:

- Use persuasive narratives (like animal abilities, to inspire empathy and awe; kinship, to inspire unity and connection; and morality, to inspire altruism and compassion) to encourage people to see that all animal use is unnecessary because it is morally wrong, no matter how it might 'benefit' humans.
- Disrupt harmful narratives that influence people's views of what animal uses are 'necessary' through showcasing alternatives that enable a better future that is free of animal exploitation (and also speaks to the persuasive social progress narrative).
- Highlight how animal use harms all of us - fellow animals, humans and our shared planet - further disrupting the narrative of necessity.

Participants showed a natural concern for the wellbeing of animals:

- Speak to people's (and society's) aspirational identities. Our messages and stories need to remind people that they already do care about other animals, and that we all want to live in a

society that cares about other animals too.

- Use values-based narratives (like care and connection) to promote a vision of the future where animals have a life worth living, and we can thrive together.
- Highlight how shared values are being violated by animal industries that do not prioritise their wellbeing, and how they deceive us through marketing lies that capitalise on our natural empathy for other animals.

Participants categorised different species/uses of animals:

- Dismantle anthropocentric and hierarchal narratives by using the animal abilities narrative. Celebrate all animals as individuals, with similar traits and value to animal companions and humans, who are currently seen as the 'top' of the 'hierarchy'. Particular attention needs to be paid to animals seen at the 'bottom' of the hierarchy, such as fishes, rats, mice and insects, sharing stories that make them more relatable.
- Unique differences should be celebrated as awe-inspiring, and speak to the beauty of diversity, helping to break down the barriers of constructed categories (like 'pets', 'pests', 'food', 'domesticated', 'wild', 'cute' and 'dangerous').

Participants believed animals were living, feeling beings:

- Use the already dominant animal sentience narrative to promote a shift from some animals being seen as 'something' to all animals being seen as 'someone'. Using the animal abilities narrative will also help propel this shift.

Introduction

As part of Animal Think Tank's long-term movement strategy roadmap research, focus groups were conducted with segments of the British public, exploring 'Opinions on animals' roles in society'. [NB. We intentionally used the more mainstream term 'roles' rather than 'uses', to fully understand participants' thinking without priming or leading them in any way. However, 'roles' is not a framing we would ever use in public communications, as we believe other animals are here with humans, not for humans.]

The purpose of these focus groups was to explore people's attitudes and values in relation to other animals, in addition to discerning what aspects of animal use people support, justify or perceive to be wrong. The data generated from these focus groups was reviewed and analysed independently by Animal Think Tank's Narrative team to gain insight into the key narratives that underpin peoples opinions on animals' 'roles'/uses in society.

Methodology

11 UK-based focus groups were conducted, comprising: 3 general public groups, 4 youth (18-24) groups, 2 right-leaning conservative groups, and 2 Christian groups.

The main open-ended questions asked were:

- When you hear the word 'animal' or 'animals', what do you feel? What comes to mind?
- What impact have animals had on your life (positive and negative)?
- What roles do you think animals play in society? Which do you find problematic, which are you OK with, and why?
- What advice would you give to animal rights activists/groups when it comes to campaigning?

Data from these focus groups was analysed to highlight participants' dominant narratives regarding other animals, our relationships with them, and their use within society.

Results

As there was no significant differentiation in opinions between different groups, analysis reflects the overarching narratives evidenced.

1. Necessity

The defence or opposition of different types of animal use based on the perception of being 'necessary' or 'unnecessary'.

The concept of 'necessity' was used by participants to defend certain animal uses (e.g. testing on animals for human medicine, food, 'service' animals like guide dogs etc.) and/or to oppose others (e.g. 'trophy' hunting, testing on animals for cosmetics, circuses etc.). In some instances participants explicitly compared different uses, stating one was necessary over another - e.g. using animals for food is "not for the greater good in the same way as research, it is fulfilling a purpose... while circuses have no purpose and cause unnecessary suffering"). Participants' opinions of what types of animal use were unacceptable reflect current legislation that was implemented after decades of public campaigning against practices such as wild animals in circuses, testing cosmetics on animals, and hunting. This highlights how successful the animal rights movement has been in turning public opinion on specific issues that were once considered acceptable.

Unnecessary = unacceptable

Views on what was 'unnecessary' were related to animal use within entertainment and testing on animals. Testing on animals for cosmetics, 'trophy' hunting, fox hunting and circuses were explicitly described as 'unnecessary' and thus unacceptable:

- 'Trophy' hunting: "cruelty"; "just greed and profit".
- Circuses: "[animals] kept in cages and mistreated"; "force an animal to do something the animals would never choose to do"; "exist just for money".
- Hunting: "very cruel... you don't have to shoot a live animal"; "abhorrent"; "bullying with the

chasing"; "psychotic... not right".

- Cosmetic testing: "vanity"; "not needed"; "not as simple as putting a bit of blush on a rabbit. They restrain these animals, they brutalise these animals".
- Animals for labour: the use of animals for labour, such as farming/agriculture, was suggested to be unnecessary if "the option was there to use some type of other technology or another method".

Necessary = acceptable

Views on what was necessary, and therefore acceptable, were often tied to human health and perceived survival:

- Scientific/medical testing: perceived as a "necessary evil".
- Labour: dogs used for labour (e.g. guide dogs, sniffer dogs) perceived as necessary as they benefit human lives and are thought to be treated well. Acknowledgement that bomb detection dogs could get killed but, because it could save human lives, was acceptable.
- Food: discussion on the necessity of using animals as food was more mixed, with some participants viewing it as 'necessary', others stating it was a preference and 'unnecessary', yet by all participants this category was perceived as acceptable and justified (see: Rationalisation of Meat Consumption narrative below). This implies that individual preference makes the use of animals as food acceptable.

2. Rationalisations of 'meat' consumption

The view that eating animals or animal-derived products is acceptable because it is normal, natural, necessary or nice (the 4Ns).

This narrative reflects Piazza et al's (2015) research discussing the common rationalisations people use to defend their choice of eating meat, which serve to alleviate some of the guilt associated with the moral conflict and cognitive dissonance of causing harm to animals yet wanting to consume them.

Normal: "We've always eaten meat and I don't see a problem with that."

Natural: Humans are at the top of the food chain:

"We are carnivores and have been for hundreds of thousands of years."

Necessary: Meat seen as required to have a healthy, balanced diet:

"... following a vegan diet is quite complicated and quite difficult to get all of the nutrients."

- There were some discussions about vegan diets, with participants stating that animal/animal product consumption wasn't necessary, but there were concerns about affordability and taste of alternatives.
- Also discussions about necessity due to farmers' livelihoods (linked to the *Economic* narrative - see further below).

Nice: "I care a lot about animal welfare as a principle but then I really enjoy meat, and I never ever put the two together and I think if I did I probably would become vegetarian or vegan. But I just avoid thinking about it just because... I just like meat so much."

3. Anthropocentrism

The view humans are unique, more valuable and at the top of a hierarchy.

All focus groups had an anthropocentric undertone, but this narrative was most prevalent when discussing the use of animals for food, testing on animals for scientific purposes, and animal abilities.

Testing on animals

- Testing on animals for medical/scientific reasons was deemed necessary to save humans' lives, and the benefit of saving human lives outweighs the cost of animals' lives, irrespective of the numbers involved.

- "A human's life is unfortunately worth more than an animal's life".

Food

- There was a common belief that humans are at the top of the food chain, so it is acceptable and natural to consume other animals: "Animals have to die so I can live".
- Christian focus groups expressed that God placed humans at the top of the food chain.
- Human preference to consume animals/animal products was considered more important than other animals' lives (reinforcing the Hierarchy narrative).

Abilities

- Animals in general were perceived as 'lesser' than humans due to 'inferior' abilities.
- Humans are 'advanced' in comparison to animals, who just: "react to stimuli, they're hungry, they eat. They're not going to look at an animal and feel sorry for that animal and not eat it."
- "God gave humans rationality, authority, power, knowledge, and those things make us a higher life form." (This insight was only evidenced in one of the Christian focus groups.)

4. Hierarchy

The view that some animals are more valuable and superior than others:

In addition to the anthropocentric belief that humans are at the top of a hierarchy over other animals, there is also a perceived hierarchy of animals dependent on categorisations. The categories identified aligned with those evidenced in research by Ayturk and Broad (2021) regarding the moral concern toward different categories of animal species.

Companions

Animal companions were perceived as separate from other categories of animals:

- They are the most valued category of animals, who evoke positive "warm and fuzzy feelings" and are considered "nice" animals.
- For many participants, animal companions were the first category of animal that came to mind if they had animal family members, and they initially referred to these personal interactions.
- Dogs in particular were considered part of the family, who give "unconditional love and loyalty."

Wildlife

- When talking about animals in the wild, there was a focus on exotic mammals, such as monkeys, lions, giraffes and elephants.
- Respect for wildlife: "Great respect for nature and might I be out [sic] in other countries, I'd enjoy seeing the wildlife out there locally."
- Separation of this category into wild animals in their natural environment and those kept in captivity. Concerns for those kept in captivity being taken out of their natural environment, being kept in small enclosures and being mistreated.

Food/farmed animals

- Referred to as "meat" and "food" - perceived as commodities and products.
- Reluctance to consider their treatment because they're "out of sight".
- Cognitive dissonance - participants use the 4Ns as justifications for meat consumption, but there is still internal conflict about this use and they prefer not to think about it:

"You do want them to be treated the best they can be but in the long run I'm not thinking about it whilst I'm preparing my food or going to the shop and buying it. I'm just simply buying it and not thinking about what happened to them beforehand."

'Pests'

- Predominantly mice, rats, and insects were placed within this category.
- Some participants had no issue with insects being killed and differentiated between them and other animals, describing them as: "vile and disgusting".
- One participant was "terrified" of spiders and another stated mice sent her into a "wild panic" and she "really resented the mice in our home".
- Negative feelings towards animals within this category - seen as separate from wildlife, even though they are part of it.

'Other' (animals who are not considered animals at all)

Non-mammals, such as fishes, were commonly placed within this category:

- Fishes "aren't that useful" and are not viewed as "complete animals" because they are perceived to lack the emotional and mental characteristics of land animals.
- Reasons for this is linked to lack of visibility and/or interaction with these animals in comparison to other categories.

5. Economy

The perceived economic importance of meat, egg and dairy for farmers' livelihoods:

- "We need farmers otherwise they are out of work."
- "[The] livelihood of farmers is an important factor to consider when thinking about animals used for food."
- "Animals, by and large, are there to provide a living for the farmers, who mostly look after the animals because it is their livelihood and they care for them".

6. Welfare

Support for better treatment of animals and improved legislation:

Ethical treatment

The concept of welfare was viewed positively:

- "... focus on the way animals are used and ensuring it is humane rather than trying to stop animal use."
- The UK is a world leader in animal welfare: "welfare of animals in the UK is really high compared to other parts of the world"; the UK has "some of the most amazing protections for animals."
- Animal uses are OK "as long as there is respect for them... and they are not treated as something to play with"; support for "humane treatment".
- Perceptions of poor welfare are believed to be down to individual owners/businesses and not industry as a whole.

Unnatural environments

- There were concerns over the welfare of animals kept in zoos due to the unnaturalness of the environment, however, many participants perceived zoos as a good education/conservation tool: "A giraffe or a polar bear or a red panda - our weather conditions are not suited for those animals ... that's not normal for them, so they're not even acting the way they're meant to be acting if they were in their natural habitat."

Racing dogs/horses

- Concerns over the welfare of dogs and horses used in racing and what happens after their 'career': "I don't know if I totally agree that horse racing and greyhound racing [industries] would necessarily treat them better because at the end of the day, they're still using them for the purpose of making money... you don't know what happens behind closed doors because as soon as that horse loses, how do they treat them?"

Breeding dogs

- Concerns about the health and welfare of certain dog breeds and the conditions in which they are bred.
- "I think certainly there could be stricter rules about the puppy farms and breeding sector. During the pandemic that just went off the scale and all these illegal puppy farms are popping up and breeders are just in it for the money, not giving two hoots about the welfare of the animals."
- "Anything that affects an animal's health is wrong to do. So, I mean the flat-faced dogs... animals that are bred to look pretty and cute but potentially affects their health is a bad thing."

Farming practices

- Opposition to most standard farming industry practices (e.g. tail 'docking', killing of male chicks in the egg industry, beak 'trimming'), however, minimal awareness/knowledge on these topics.
- "I don't like the idea of tail docking... I don't really like the idea of tagging ears, but it's supposed to be fairly painless, I believe. I think the one that, if I thought about it too much would upset me, is the little baby chicks [referring to the killing of male chicks in the egg industry]."

Banning of practices/industries perceived as having bad welfare

- Support for bans on circuses, hunting foxes, racing horses and dogs, farming puppies and breeding that causes welfare issues, and support for stronger regulations on animal uses.

7. Animal sentience

The belief that animals are living, feeling beings:

Previous quantitative research at Animal Think Tank also showed animal sentience was one of the most dominant cultural narratives, which found 92% of study participants had an attitude of respect and recognition for other animals' cognitive and emotional abilities, as well as their rights.

- "[A]nimals have hearts, feelings, brains and emotions."
- While recognising other animals as emotional beings, many participants would still use 'it', 'that' and 'something', rather than pronouns: "It's a life, not an accessory... quite a horrible way to

think about something that does have the ability to think and feel."

- The term 'legal property' was not fully understood but disliked: "I guess it's just the word property that people struggle with because it almost makes it like an object rather than a living creature."
- Alternatives of "legal guardianship" or "legal responsibility" were suggested and preferred by participants.
- There were concerns over who would be responsible for animals' behaviour if they were not property. Although recognised as living beings, there is a consensus that they cannot be held responsible for their actions: "It makes sense to have it legally pronounced as somebody's property to hold somebody responsible".

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