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Do Sanctuary Farm Animal Interactions and Animal Welfare Education Affect Dietary Choices and Beliefs?

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With growing urban populations becoming more removed from modern farm practices and farm animals, people are disconnected from the animal products they consume and the sentient being it once was. In our society animals are viewed as products instead of individuals; pigs are bacon, cows are hamburgers, and chickens are nuggets (Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Miralles, 2019). People also fail to recognize the ethical animal welfare issues surrounding factory farm practices and the environmental impacts of raising large numbers of animals for growing populations (Alonso et al., 2020). This inspired my first research study, completed in 2019, which concluded that children have the ability to become more compassionate towards animals and act empathetically if they are equipped with the knowledge to do so (Walker, 2020).

Introduction:

I reasoned that education was only part of the equation, however, and meeting farm animals on a personal level would promote greater compassion while reducing the disconnection that exists. As a result of my research, I founded The Little Red Barn Sanctuary, where families could learn compassion and increase their empathy towards farm animals through education and personal interaction with sanctuary animals. In order to determine the impact of these interactions and education, my research aimed to demonstrate that compassionate empathy would increase with personal interactions and knowledge of of farm animal welfare issues. Thereby shifting beliefs towards farm animals, motivating dietary changes with a plant-based emphasis, and promoting animal welfare involvement.

Hypothesis:

If people experience meeting farm animals on a personal level and learn about the realities of what their lives were like in the intensive farming industry, they will feel more compassionate empathy towards them. As a direct result, they will feel a personal need to alleviate the suffering of intensively farmed animals by making dietary changes to a more plant-based diet and/or become involved in animal welfare issues in their community.

Methods and Materials:

Four different groups of randomized participants completed an initial survey regarding their diets and beliefs towards farm animals before any interaction and/or education. This survey was designed to remove bias through neutral and dispassionate word choices, focusing on the authentic opinions of the individuals. Following their session, the participants completed the final survey which consisted of the identical statements as the initial survey to determine the overall effect(s) of their session. They were also instructed to explain the dietary choices they were going to implement and the ways they would attempt to advocate for animals if any.

Additionally, the participants completed a 6-month follow-up survey to understand if any changes occurred in diets and beliefs toward farm animals. Each group had 10 male and 10 female participants, ranging in age from 18-30. All participants followed an omnivorous diet prior to the survey consisting of both plants and animal products.

Group 1, Education only: Received two hours of information on farm animal welfare issues surrounding current factory farming. However, no interaction with farm animals took place.

Group 2, Interaction only: Two hours of interaction with sanctuary farm animals, but received no education about farm animal welfare issues, or the stories about the animals they interacted with.

Group 3, Education and Interaction: Two hours interacting with sanctuary farm animals while learning about their individual stories and what similar animals experience in factory farming.

Group 4, Control: Received neither education nor interaction.

The survey measured the participant's beliefs, dietary choices, and overall compassionate empathy toward farm animals. Each survey had 17 statements relating to their opinions of farm animals and the welfare issues facing them, to which the participants reacted on a scale of one to five. The statements were simple general sentences such as 'Animals are treated fairly in agriculture' to which the participants would circle the response that best described their stance on the topic. (Note: an answer of 4 shows the most empathetic response)

1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4- strongly disagree, 5- no answer.

The survey was repeated with participants after six months to determine what changes in their diets and beliefs had occurred, and which group's experiences

had a more significant, lasting effect. The participants were also asked to reflect on the goals they made 6 months prior in the final survey relating to their dietary choices and activism, to see if any were accomplished.

Results:

Group 1, Education only:

Males - In the initial survey, 70% of male participants stated that they would not consider any dietary changes to improve the lives of farm animals. However, in the final survey following the education, 80% of males said they would consider more than one dietary change to benefit farm animals. The changes between the initial and final survey were calculated on a 1-4 scale because choosing response 5 was no answer. The overall average of the responses was calculated and then compared; therefore, a positive increase would mean the participants became more compassionate and a negative increase would have the opposite effect. The male participants increased 0.95 on the scale after learning about farm animal welfare issues. When surveyed again after 6 months, the male participants were found to have decreased only 0.02 on the survey scale, with half of the participants having made dietary changes.

Females - Although the females started with a higher level of compassion toward farm animals, the results show an increase from the weighted averages of the initial to final survey of 0.77. As depicted in the 6-month survey, the females had a greater lasting effect compared to the males; an increase of 0.14. Moreover, the 6-month survey revealed that 60% of females had made dietary changes, and 90% had pursued some form of involvement in animal welfare issues in their community.

To summarize, the females showed an overall higher level of empathy over the males in all groups. However, since the males had a lower initial score, they showed greater gains.

Group 2, Interaction only:

Males - From the initial to final survey, males increased by 0.75 on the compassion scale; a lesser change compared with the Education group. The results at 6 months are markedly different, however, as this group increased a further 0.25, compared to a decrease in the male Education-only group.

Females - As in the Education-only group, females started out at a higher level of empathy towards farm animals than the male participants. The females showed a greater increase on the compassion scale over the males, at a value of 0.9. The final to 6-month female Interaction Only survey showed the greatest increase throughout the entire research period, with 0.3. Clearly, Interaction had the most profound and lasting effect on the females' beliefs and dietary choices. Overall, from the initial to 6-month survey, the females had increased 1.16 on the survey scale. Importantly, 90% of women had made significant dietary changes, selecting more plant-based foods.

Group 3, Education and Interaction:

Males - In the initial survey, the weighted average of their answers was 1.4 indicating limited compassion. In the final survey, this group increased more than any other male group, to 2.8, with the more compassionate answers of agree or strongly agree answered most frequently. With a slight increase in the 6-month survey, this group showed an overall increase of 1.47. At 6 months, 70% of the male participants had made changes towards an increased plant-based diet, while 80% had become actively involved with animal welfare issues.

Females - Female participants increased by 1.3 on the scale between the initial and final surveys compared to the comparable male group at 1.4. with many planning to select more plant-based foods in the future. After increasing 0.2 from the final to six-month surveys, this group had the most change towards empathy with an increase of 1.52. Furthermore, a striking 90% of participants implemented dietary changes and exceeded the goals described in their final survey 6 months earlier.

Group 4, Control:

There was no change in the beliefs or diets of the male and female groups, validating that the changes in groups 1-3 were a result of their education on animal welfare issues and/or their direct interaction with animals.

Discussion:

This research shows that participants who were introduced to farm animals while learning about farm animal practices expressed the greatest change in their attitudes and diets. Nevertheless, numerous indications of important changes were seen in all test groups. One particular pattern that emerged was when participants were observed to have connected with a specific farm animal, they changed their diet to completely eliminate products of this animal's species. For example, a participant who connected personally with a hen, changed their diet from traditional to vegan. This shows that while education might have a larger initial effect, forming an emotional connection during animal interaction appears to have a greater long-term influence. Further, participants following traditional diets initially reported a significant reduction in their consumption of animal products after meeting the sanctuary animals. Moreover, others reported a pivot in their diet to become vegetarian or vegan, exceeding the goals they described in their responses 6 months earlier. Generally, the female participants had a larger increase in their empathetic responses. This may be due to the circumstance that the animal welfare issues discussed in the education as well as the interaction and education group can also be considered feminist issues. In animal agriculture, female animals are continually exploited; they are artificially inseminated, bred to have increased litter sizes, and slaughtered them they can no longer produce offspring. I believe that the female participants were more emotionally affected because of these violating issues, causing their beliefs and diets to become more compassionate. Interestingly, the male participants had a greater increase in the education-only group compared to the interaction group only leading me to hypothesize that male individuals are more likely to use logic for decision-making rather than emotion from the interactions. Comparing the male and female group who received both interaction and education, the male participants increased 0.1 more than the female group between

initial and final survey. Having less compassionate initial answers may have been responsible for the larger increase as the male participants had more space to improve in their scores. Discovered in the 6 month survey, many participants admirably pursued other forms of advocacy, while educating themselves further about these important issues and encouraging others to do the same. Of all of the groups, the education and interaction group had the most impressive increases in compassionate beliefs and plant-based dietary changes, leading me to conclude that when both the emotional and logical parts of our brains understand a topic can the most efficient and impactful changes occur. Overall, the results far exceeded initial expectations, confirming the importance of my research.

Conclusion:

This research confirms the significance of sanctuary farm animal interaction in conjunction with knowledge of animal welfare issues; with substantial evidence showing changes in human beliefs, behaviour, and diet as a result. Research such as this and sanctuary work have important global implications (Land Is a Critical Resource, Report Says A, 2019; Poore,). Education regarding plant-based diet options, and the related health, sustainability, and environmental benefits of such a diet, are paramount cornerstones in promoting a food supply in the future that is equitable and meets the needs of all while addressing critical and ethical global issues (The US Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2018; Willett, 2002). With the impact of intensive animal agriculture on climate change, health, global hunger and freshwater scarcity, it is imperative further research in this novel area be pursued as a critical means to shift people's beliefs and diets (Land Is a Critical Resource, Report Says A, 2019; Miralles, 2019; Poore, 2018; The US Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2018; Willett, 2002).

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