



Ethical concerns regarding animal use mediate the relationship between variety of pets owned in childhood and vegetarianism in adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Plant-based and vegetarian diets have been shown to have diverse health and environmental benefits and also serve to reduce farmed animal exploitation. It is therefore worthwhile to gain a better understanding of the factors that play a role in the decision to refrain from animal products. Past studies have shown that childhood pet ownership predicts the likelihood of adherence to a vegetarian diet in adulthood. Building on this research, we tested the hypothesis that the number of different types of pets owned in childhood is positively associated with degree of restriction of animal products in adulthood, and that this relationship is mediated by pro-animal attitudes. A self-selected convenience sample of 325 participants (77.2% female; mean age = 30.23 ± 12.5) reported on their vegetarian status and completed the Animal Advocacy Scale and Child Pet Ownership Questionnaire. The number of different pets owned in childhood was positively correlated with degree of vegetarianism in adulthood ($p < 0.001$), but was no longer a significant predictor when controlling for moral opposition to animal exploitation. A significant Sobel test ($z = 4.36$; $p < 0.001$) confirmed the presence of full mediation. Findings support the hypothesis that individuals who owned a greater variety of pets in childhood endorse more concerns regarding animal use. This, in turn, appears to predict the decision to refrain from animal products in adulthood. The possibility that an enhanced ability to generalize empathy from companion to laboratory, farm, and wildlife animals underlies this relationship should be examined in future research.

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Vegetarianism generally refers to the conscious elimination of one or more animal products from one's diet or overall lifestyle, and ranges from semi-vegetarianism (i.e., consumes some meat but refrains from others) to veganism (i.e., refrains from all animal products, in diet and lifestyle) (Heiss, Hormes, & Timko, 2017). More recent work has emphasized the importance of considering vegetarianism as a spectrum, as opposed to a dichotomous variable, as different subgroups of vegetarians appear to exhibit meaningful differences (Hoffman, Stallings, Bessinger, & Brooks, 2013; Timko, Hormes, & Chubski, 2012). Vegetarian diets are associated with a range of positive health outcomes, including a decreased risk of cancer, heart disease, type II diabetes, and obesity (Campbell, Pappia, & Chen, 1998; Le & Sabate, 2014; Mishra et al., 2013).

There are many motivations for refraining from meat consumption, with ethical, health, and/or environmental concerns being most commonly cited within the United States (Timko et al., 2012).

Various factors play a role in the decision to refrain from animal products, and past research has found links between childhood pet attachment and adherence to a vegetarian diet in adulthood (Paul & Serpell, 1993; Rothgerber & Mican, 2014). Specifically, there is evidence to suggest that a positive relationship with a companion animal in childhood is positively associated with meat avoidance, motivated by ethical, rather than health or other concerns, later in life (Paul & Serpell, 1993). Total number of pets in childhood has also been shown to predict adherence to any vegetarian diet, but only in women (Paul & Serpell, 1993). In addition to refraining from consuming certain animal products, individuals who had more pets in childhood were also found to endorse greater concern for animals in general; that is, they had empathy not only for companion animals, but that empathy generalized to include laboratory, farm, and wildlife animals (Paul & Serpell, 1993).

To better understand the link between pet ownership in

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childhood and vegetarianism in adulthood, a recent study assessed the relationship between levels of attachment to a childhood pet and likelihood of refraining from animal products in adulthood (Rothgerber & Mican, 2014). Individuals who had formed a stronger attachment to their childhood pet reported more frequently avoiding meat, as well as higher levels of empathy towards animals and humans. Rothgerber and Mican (2014) posit a possible three-step method by which childhood pet ownership leads to vegetarianism later in life: 1. a child is raised in a home where they are encouraged to develop empathy for their family pet, 2. the child generalizes that empathy to other animals, and 3. the child comes to recognize animal suffering in the food system, empathy is felt for those animals, and meat is avoided (Rothgerber & Mican, 2014).

In light of evidence to suggest that childhood pet ownership is positively associated with empathy for companion and other animals, and the likelihood of meat avoidance, this study was designed to examine if ownership of a greater variety of pets in childhood similarly increases the odds of adherence to a higher level of vegetarian diet in later life (e.g., vegan as opposed to lacto-ovo-vegetarian). Forming attachments to multiple different types of pets in childhood may facilitate the development of empathy for farmed and other non-companion animals. This may be facilitated through an expanding of the moral circle via exclusion rather than inclusion mindsets (Laham, 2009) or accept animals' ability to suffer (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). We therefore hypothesized that greater diversity in childhood pet ownership (i.e., individuals who grew up exposed to different species of pets) is associated with a higher degree of vegetarianism (on a scale ranging from "omnivore – no animal product restriction" to "dietary vegan ('vegan') – complete animal product restriction from the diet"). We further posited that the mechanism underlying this relationship is greater endorsement of pro-animal attitudes. In other words, we predicted that exposure to a greater number of different childhood pets leads to greater restriction of animal products from the diet through more positive attitudes towards animal and a moral opposition to animal exploitation.

1. Methods

All methods were reviewed and approved by the local Institutional Review Board. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research and consented prior to completion of questionnaires.

1.1. Participants

Inclusion criteria for this study included English fluency and being over the age of 18. A total of 1058 respondents began the survey. The study description specifically encouraged participation by individuals currently engaged in some form of meat avoidance. Participants were excluded from the analyses reported here for the following reasons: incomplete responses on the Animal Advocacy Scale, Childhood Pet Ownership Questionnaire, and/or questions about vegetarian type ($n = 565$), being under the age of 18 or not indicating age ($n = 165$), and duplicate surveys ($n = 3$). The final sample included 325 participants (mean age $M = 30.2$ years, $SD = 12.5$; 77.2%, $n = 251$ female, 88.3%, $n = 287$ white). Participants identified as "omnivores" (31.7%, $n = 103$) "meat reducers" (8.6%, $n = 28$), "lacto-ovo-vegetarians" (14.5%, $n = 47$), and "vegans" (45.2%, $n = 147$). The likely reason for the relatively low response rate was the lack of incentives provided for completion of the 45-min survey. There were no significant differences in sex, age, or prevalence of vegetarianism between survey completers and non-completers (all $p > 0.05$).

1.2. Data collection

Participants were recruited primarily on social media webpages focused on vegetarianism, veganism, and food in general, as well as psychology or general survey postings websites. Paper flyers with survey information asking, "Do you adhere to a vegetarian or vegan diet?" "Do you watch what you eat?" and, "Do you love food?" were also posted in local health food stores.

1.3. Measures

Participants provided information on demographics, including age, sex, and race and ethnicity. Participants were then asked if they adhere to any vegetarian diet, with definitions of "flexitarian" (mostly eat vegetarian, but sometimes eat meat), "semi-vegetarian" (eat some types of meat, but refrain from others; for example, eat chicken, but refrain from beef), "pescetarian" (eat fish, eggs, dairy, but refrain from other meat products), "lacto-ovo-vegetarian" (eat eggs, dairy, but refrain from all animal flesh), "vegan" (refrain from all animal products), and "raw vegan" (consume exclusively uncooked non-animal products) provided. For analysis purposes, "vegans" were combined with "raw vegans" to create the "vegan" group, and "pescetarians," "semi-vegetarians," and "flexitarians" were combined to create the "meat reducers" group. Participants who indicated that they did not avoid any meat or other animal products were categorized as "omnivores."

1.3.1. Animal Advocacy Scale (AAS)

The AAS was developed to assess individual beliefs and attitudes regarding the use of animals in food, clothing, and research (Cronbach's alpha in the present sample $\alpha = 0.97$) (Wuensch, Jenkins, & Poteat, 2002). Items on the AAS are scored on a Likert scale ranging from "0 = strongly disagree" to "4 = strongly agree," and include statements such as "it is wrong to wear leather belts and shoes" and "it is morally wrong to eat milk and eggs." Higher scores represent a stronger belief that animals deserve rights, and a greater objection to the misuse of animals.

1.3.2. Childhood Pet Ownership Questionnaire (CPOQ)

The CPOQ aims to assess experiences with pets throughout childhood (Paul & Serpell, 1994). For the purposes of this study, we examined responses to question 7 of the CPOQ inquiring about the number of different types of pets kept up to and including 16 years of age. Respondents are asked to identify the number of specific types of pets owned by them or their family, with response options including "horses, ponies or donkeys," "dogs," "cats," "small mammals (e.g., rabbit, mouse, guinea pig)," "birds," and "fish, reptiles, amphibians, insects, spiders, etc." Data were recoded such that higher ratings reflect a higher number of different types of pets owned in childhood.

1.3.3. Companion animal bonding scale (CABS)

Also included in the survey was the "past form" of the CABS, an eight-item questionnaire reflecting closeness to childhood pets (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1987). Each response ranges on a 5 point Likert scale from "5 = always" to "1 = never" and includes questions such as "How often were you responsible for your animal's care?" and "how often did you feel that you had a close relationship with your companion animal?" Higher scores reflect higher closeness to childhood companion animals.

1.3.4. Additional measures

In addition to the measures of interest, the following questionnaires were also included in the survey: Asch impression (Asch, 1946), Meat Ambivalence Scale (Berndsen & van der Pligt, 2004),

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