

Behavior Inconsistent with Attitudes?

I welcome John and Valerie Braithwaite's survey on "Attitudes Toward Animal Suffering" (*Int J Stud Anim Prob* 3(1):42-49, 1982) as a good beginning in establishing a much-needed empirical basis for discussions of the issue. Their selection of survey items is exceptionally well designed, in that it provides for a systematic comparison of attitudes across relevant values of several important variables.

However, in my opinion the Braithwaites' analysis of the data obtained reflects a mistaken assumption that one can infer behavior from written responses to a questionnaire. They note the inconsistencies revealed by the findings, that while 90% of the respondents disapproved of "the use of inhumane killing methods at an

abattoir," only 41% disapproved of the practice of eating the meat from such abattoirs; and that while 73% disapproved of force-feeding geese to produce pâté, only 46% disapproved of eating the pâté. They conclude from these and other findings that their study "raise[s] the question of whether more fruitful avenues for future research might lie in exploring the structure of the inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior [emphasis in original], rather than in further analysis of the structure of attitudes alone." Further, they state in their abstract that "The results, though preliminary, strongly suggest that attitudes may be in great part supportive of animal welfare and animal rights. However, as reflected in the answers to the questionnaire, actual behavior does not always follow suit."

The Braithwaites are certainly correct about behavior not always being consistent with expressed attitudes, but their survey data do not show this. Rather, the data indicate that people have different attitudes about different behaviors: killing and eating. Perhaps this reflects differences in attitudes about what others should do and what is permissible for oneself to do (others have the job of killing animals in abattoirs; everyone has the option of eating meat); or maybe the issue is an unwillingness to take moral responsibility for an act already committed ("I might as well eat it since the harm is already done"), or a feeling that an individual boycott would be futile. At any rate, attitudes about behavior — either the behavior of killing or that of eating — are not the same thing as the behavior itself. It would be interesting to know whether the 46% who disapproved of eating pâté would actually refrain from eating it at a dinner party; only that kind of information would show if there is an inconsistency between attitude and behavior, as the Braithwaites claim there is.

I would like to make one other comment about this study. The Braithwaites' brief analysis of the data presented in the accompanying table does not mention some very interesting aspects of

these findings. One significant point is that the painfulness of the research emerges as by far the most important criterion in respondents' disapproval. Of the other three variables examined, the species of animal and the purpose of the experiment also make a significant difference, but whether or not the research involves killing the animal is given relatively little weight by respondents. Respondents tended to disapprove of painful research regardless of its medical benefits (if the research was described as painless, then the purpose of the research gained importance dramatically as a criterion). Likewise, respondents

tended to disapprove of the non-medical use of research animals regardless of its painlessness (if the research was medical, however, then the pain criterion gained in importance.)

Among Australian college students, at least, it would seem that the traditional justification of animal research in terms of its medical benefits to humans will have little effect unless the issue of pain is also addressed.

Mary T. Phillips
34 Morton Street
New York, NY 10014