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Empathy towards animals: Perspectives of veterinary students and faculty in Haryana

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Abstract

Empathy for animals has positively related to concern for animal well-being and humane behavior toward them. In recent years people are becoming more aware about animal rights, welfare. Further the veterinarians are increasingly expected to be informed about animal welfare in a broader sense than health alone. There is a lack of empirical information about the level of empathy towards the animals. So current study was conducted was conducted on 50 veterinary students and 50 faculty members in Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences located in Hisar to assess the extent of empathy with animals. A Nine point Likert scale covered judgments ranging from 'Very strongly agree' to 'Very strongly disagree.' developed by Paul (2000) was used for measurement of level of empathy. Surprisingly it was found that majority of respondents were having low extent of empathy with animals. Students were having higher extent of empathy towards animals as compared to scientists. This study suggested that further investigation into the extent to which veterinary education influences empathy among veterinary students and veterinary faculty members is needed.

Keywords: Empathy, animals, veterinary students, faculty members

Introduction

In recent years, the role of empathy among veterinary students and scientists has become increasingly important due to increased awareness of animal welfare issues worldwide. The rising demand of animal products (Komarek *et al.*, 2021) ^[10] will create pressures in favour of factory farming. Simultaneously, demands for higher animal welfare are being heard every now and then and are expected to continue to grow in future. The animal production practices are expected to conform to the societal expectations of animal welfare. In such a scenario, the animal scientists are being increasingly expected to play a leading role in understanding and propagating the evolving ideas of the animal welfare. These changes represent a fundamental evolution in the way veterinarians approach their work, emphasizing technical expertise but also a deeper understanding and love for the animals they treat. Because empathy towards animals and beliefs in animal-human continuity appear to play an important role in shaping the human-animal relationship and in determining the way animals are treated and cared for (Colombo *et al.*, 2023) ^[6].

Empathy in veterinary practice goes beyond mere sympathy. It includes the ability to understand and share the animal's emotions and experiences. By studying animal behavior and welfare from an empathetic perspective, researchers can uncover ideas for improving animal welfare practices.

Moreover empathy toward animals may relate to (or be an indicator of) the ability to empathize with humans as well as potentially affecting attitudes toward, and treatment of animals (Taylor and Signal, 2005) ^[16]. Through compassion and empathy, we can promote a holistic understanding of rights, fostering a world where the well-being and dignity of all sentient beings are upheld (Chauhan, 2023) ^[5]. Now a days there is a corresponding demand for veterinarians and scientists who not only possess technical skills but also demonstrate empathy in their interactions with animals.

In fact, empathy has emerged as a cornerstone of modern veterinary practice and research. By assessing empathy, veterinary students and scientists can contribute to a more compassionate and ethical approach to animal care, aligning with evolving societal values

and advancing the field of veterinary towards a more humane future. Consequently, it becomes important to understand empathy level of veterinarians and animal scientists. Till now no empirical study have been conducted in Haryana to assess the level of empathy among veterinary students and faculty members. Therefore, the present study was conducted on veterinary students and faculty members on Empathy level of veterinary scientists and students with animals in Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar, Haryana.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted at Lala Lajpat Rai University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Hisar. All the faculty members at LUVAS were taken as universe for the study. A sample of 50 members was chosen using simple lottery method. Similarly a random sample of ten students from each class of B.V.Sc and AH programme (1-5 yrs) was drawn constituting a total sample size of 100 respondents.

Empathy is “an emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else” (Batson and Coke, 1981) [13]. Empathy has been proposed as a mediating factor in aggression to both humans and animals, with a number of authors suggesting links between deficits in empathy and antisocial behavior in children, adolescents, and adults in both clinical and non-clinical populations (e.g., Hastings *et al.*, 2000; Warden and Mackinnon 2003) [18, 17]. Furthermore, it has been suggested that animal-directed empathy may generalize to human-directed empathy (Ascione, 2001) [2]. The concept of empathy has been defined in a variety of different ways. In particular, there is disagreement about whether empathy is an emotional experience consistent with another’s situation, or a cognitive process of imagining another’s perspective (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987) [7]. As Empathy often serves as a motive for morality (Hoffman, 1987) [9].

Animal empathy refers to empathic responses to the emotional experiences of animals (Paul 2000) [12] and has similar characteristics to human-oriented empathy (Young *et al.*, 2018) [18].

The animal empathy scale developed by Paul (2000) was used for measurement of level of empathy. Nine point Likert scale (Very Strongly Agree-VSA, Strongly Agree-SA, Fairly Agree-FA, Agree-A, Neutral-N, Disagree-D, Fairly Disagree-FD, Strongly Disagree-SD, Very Strongly Disagree-VSD) was used for scoring from 0 to 8. Reverse scoring was done for positive statements. There were total twenty two statements in the scale. Data was collected by preparing questionnaire which was mailed to respondents.

Results and Discussion

The animal empathy scale containing 22 statements developed by Paul (2000) [12] was used for measurement of level of empathy. The minimum and maximum possible scores of empathy scale were 0 and 176, respectively. The minimum score obtained by the respondents was 69 while the maximum score obtained was 168 indicating a high degree of variability. Mean score of all the respondents was 101.85 with students scoring slightly higher (Fig 1). On the whole, a majority of respondents were having low extent of empathy with animals. On the basis of the total score obtained the respondents were divided into three categories of extent of empathy (i.e. Low (66-100), Medium (101-135) and High (136-170)) (Table 1).

The differences among the three categories of respondents of different empathy levels were statistically different (Table 2). Further, as can be seen from fig 4, large percentage of respondents were having lower extent of empathy with animals. The respondents’ score, in general, indicated low to moderate empathy towards animals. More percentage of scientists and students were having lower level of empathy with animals as represented in fig 2 and 3.

Table 1: Classification of respondents on the basis of empathy scores

S. No.	Extent of empathy	Students (n=50)		Scientists (n=50)		Total (n=100)	
		F (%)	Mean Score	F (%)	Mean Score	F (%)	Mean Score
1	Low (60-100)	26 (52)	91.23	33(66)	89.36	59(59)	90.3
2	Medium (101-135)	23(46)	115.83	15(30)	114.9	38(38)	115.4
3	High (136-170)	1(2)	140	2(4)	168	3(3)	154

n = number of respondents

Table 2: Comparison of respondents across different empathy extent categories using one way ANOVA.

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F critical
Between Groups	24763.66	2	12381.83	164.772	6.39E-32	3.090187
Within Groups	7289.09	97	75.14525			
Total	32052.75	99				

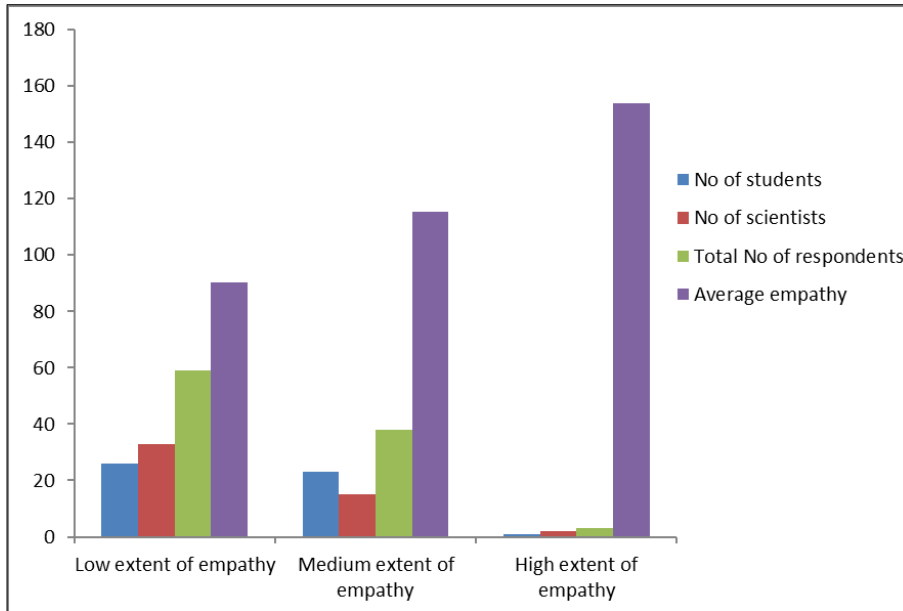
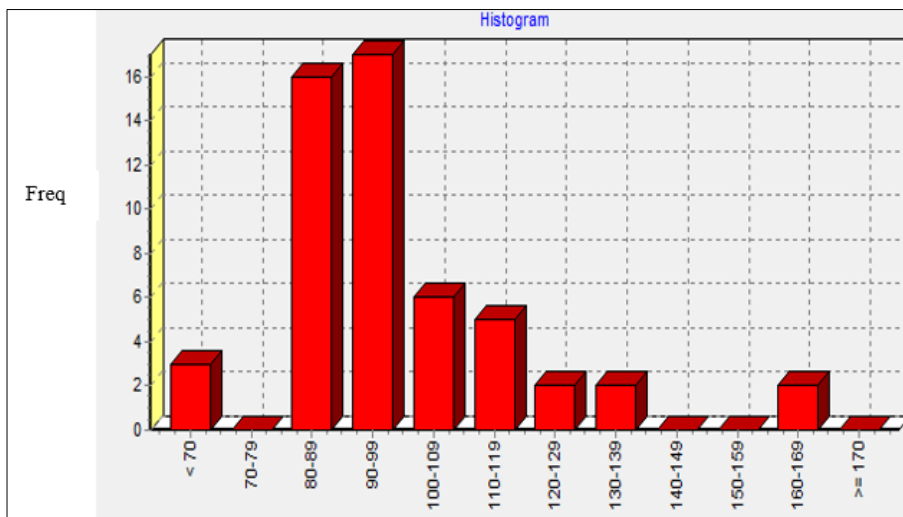
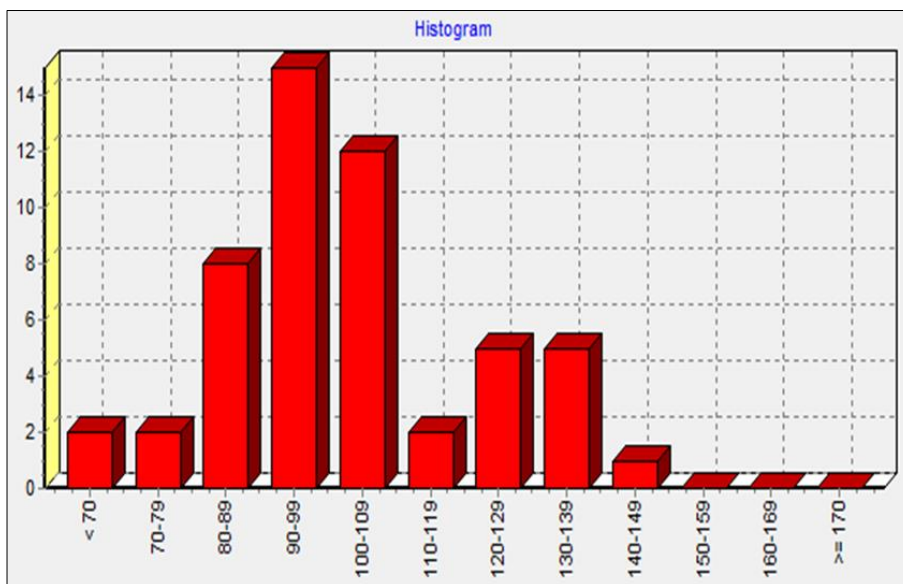


Fig 1: Diagram depicting the distribution of respondents across different categories of empathy extent



Empathy Score

Fig 2: Histogram representing frequency distribution of scientists according to empathy scores



Empathy Score

Fig 3: Histogram representing frequency distribution of students according to empathy scores

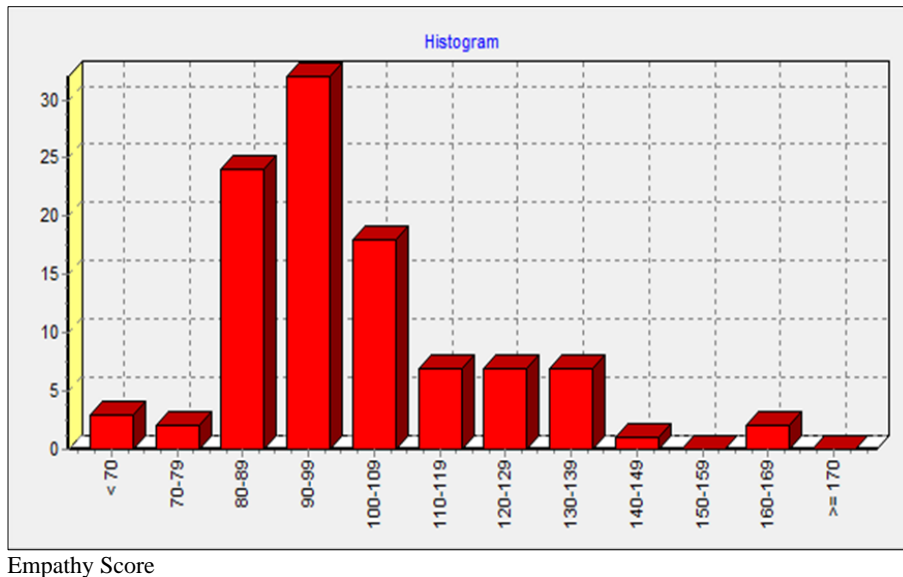


Fig 4: Histogram representing frequency distribution of total respondents according to empathy scores.

Veterinarians are widely considered to be informed, rational authorities who possess expertise on virtually any topic relating to animals, including animal welfare but the veterinary practice occupies a difficult and complex moral position, because it serves both animals and human interests (Tannenbaum, 1993) [15]. Difficult ethical decisions are commonplace as vets try to ensure welfare of their patients while at the same time accommodating often strict economic constraints and the owners' expectations and demands (*ibid*). Veterinary education has been characterized not just as an education exercise, but as a rite of passage, by which naïve school leavers are transformed into professionals who have learned to cope with such conflicts as a sick animal whose monetary value is less than the cost of treatment, the owner who presses for continuing and potentially painful intervention for dying pet, the owner who demands euthanasia for completely healthy animal. The development of values system and belief rationalization thus posits challenges to the vets. It has been argued by the sociologists that medical students undergo a process of hardening, adopting a more detached attitude towards their patients and the work they are learning to do, in order to cope with the distress and conflict they inevitably encounter (Smith and Kleinman 1989, Arluke and Haffery 1996) [14, 1]. Similar might be the case with the veterinarians. Earlier, O'Farrell (1990) [11] and Blackshaw and Blackshaw (1993) [4], both found that veterinary students viewed qualified vets as generally 'tough-minded' and pet owners generally emotional and 'tender-minded' towards animals. This perhaps represents the mid way of the so called development of hardened and detached view.

Similarly in a study conducted on veterinary medicine students' in Colombia and it was observed that average empathy levels toward animals were lower than those de-scribed in other studies (Romero *et al.*, 2022) [13]. However it was observed that first-year veterinary students were scoring significantly higher on empathy levels as compared to those at the end of their academic training. (Colombo *et al.*, 2016) [6] also there was a sig-nificant link between human-human empathy and attitudes to animals. In the present study, the cultural values appear to be dominating the respondents' belief system. One of the probable reasons could be that a majority of respondents

were not actively engaged in veterinary services and have maintained to hold on their traditional values. Further studies to explore this complex phenomenon are strongly advocated. The results indicate that the arguments that the contribution veterinary education makes attitudes of students more or less favourable are questionable. Moreover, the scientists' opinion do not vary greatly indicating the influence of cultural and traditional values. It requires further research to understand the factors underlying their human animal relations.

Conclusion

The respondents showed low to medium level of empathy with animals. It is concluded that veterinarians face difficult choices while dealing with animals. On the one end there are strong cultural cues of oneness with animals (especially in India), and on the other hand, the strong economic logic often indicating otherwise. It is suggested that levels of empathy toward animals be improved by creating a positive learning environment, developing ethical and animal welfare knowledge, and increasing empathetic relationships and experiences with animals in the curriculum period.

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