

# Research Report

## AN ATTITUDE SURVEY OF ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

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**Abstract**—*Animal rights activism is increasing rapidly, yet no empirical research has sought to determine who the animal rights activists are, what they believe, and what they hold as their agenda. An attitude survey was therefore conducted of 402 animal rights activists who attended a recent rally in Washington. Results indicated that nearly half of these activists felt that animal research should not be the primary focus of the animal rights movement. There was also considerable disagreement surrounding the issue of laboratory break-ins. These and other findings from the survey suggest that animal rights activists hold diverse objectives and viewpoints.*

Over the past ten years, there has been a meteoric rise in animal rights activism. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, now the largest animal rights group in the United States, went from a membership of less than 100 in 1980 to more than 250,000 by 1989 (Rowan, 1989). Likewise, membership in the Humane Society of the United States, the largest animal welfare organization in the country, grew from 35,000 in 1978 to more than 500,000 in 1988, and in that time, its annual income more than quadrupled (Rowan, 1989). Recently, the debate over animal rights has been featured as the cover story in dozens of magazines across the nation, and by some estimates, there are now more than 200 animal rights groups in the United States and Canada (Bleiberg, 1989).

On June 10, 1990, a coalition of these groups sponsored a large rally in which 24,000 animal rights activists marched through the streets of Washington, D.C. (Harriston & Thomas-Lester, 1990). Three days earlier, the Association of American Medical Colleges held a "preemptive" press conference "to re-

affirm the message that such activists are nothing more than 'animal rights terrorists'" (Holden, 1990). The secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also referred to animal rights activists as "terrorists," and many other members of the medical and scientific communities have described animal rights supporters as fanatical, militant, and dangerous. Animal rights activists are commonly portrayed as wanting to eliminate all animal research, valuing animal welfare more than human welfare, maintaining a vegetarian diet, and eschewing leather products. Thus far, however, no serious attempt has been made to assess the accuracy of this portrait.

Who are the animal rights activists? What do they believe? What is their agenda?

In an effort to provide tentative answers to these questions, I conducted a survey of animal rights activists at the Washington rally. Members of the research team were deployed at several street corner locations around the perimeter of the rally site, and respondents were approached as they walked toward the rally (in order to avoid any biasing effects of the speeches or rally atmosphere). To encourage candor, respondents were not asked to disclose their names or any other identifying information. Of the 597 people who were approached, 574 (96%) agreed to complete a survey. Of these respondents, 402 were classified as animal rights activists according to the following rather stringent criteria: 1) They identified themselves as animal rights activists; 2) they described themselves as participants in the animal rights movement; 3) they indicated a belief in the philosophy of animal rights; and 4) they reported traveling from another state expressly to join the march. Although it is certainly possible to be an animal rights activist without meeting all four of these criteria, a restrictive definition was used in order to identify a highly committed core of activists from around the country.

Fifty-four respondents served as a nonactivist comparison group. These people were approached in the same manner as the activists, but as revealed later, their survey responses indicated that they were neither animal rights activists nor participants in the animal rights movement (they just happened to be walking in the direction of the rally). One hundred eighteen respondents were not classifiable as activists or nonactivists. Surveys from these respondents were therefore eliminated from further analysis.

### ACTIVIST PROFILE

Virtually all activists were white (as were almost all nonactivists), 80% were female (compared with 39% of the nonactivists), and the average age was 34 years (compared with 33 years for nonactivists). Respondents came from more than 40 states, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Seventy-eight percent of the nonactivists endorsed the philosophy of animal rights, a figure comparable to those found in other regional and national polls (Culotta, 1990; Groller, 1990). Educational level was not measured, although past research suggests that animal rights supporters are more likely to have college and graduate degrees than the public in general (Rowan, 1989).

Activists reported being involved with the animal rights movement for an average of more than 6 years, and roughly one activist in five indicated an involvement spanning more than 10 years. Eighteen percent of the respondents followed a vegan diet (i.e., ate no animal products), 45% followed a vegetarian diet (i.e., ate no meat, poultry, fish, or seafood), 28% were semi-vegetarian (i.e., occasionally ate meat, poultry, fish, or seafood), and 9% were regularly nonvegetarian. Comparable figures for nonactivists were, respectively, 0, 6, 37, and 57%. Sixty-one percent of the activists indicated that they never bought products made with

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leather, compared with 15% of the non-activists.

When asked what the single highest priority of the animal rights movement should be, nearly half of the activists checked categories other than "animals used in research" (see Table 1). Nonetheless, 85% of the activists endorsed the statement, "If it were up to me, I would eliminate all research using animals," compared with only 17% of the nonactivists. Fifteen percent of the activists indicated that they would eliminate some but not all research using animals, and none said they would maintain or increase current levels of animal research (compared with 78 and 6% of the nonactivists, respectively). Only 7% of the activists reported valuing nonhuman life more than human life; 15% placed a higher value on human life than nonhuman life, and 78% valued human and nonhuman life equally. In comparison, 69% of the nonactivists valued human life above nonhuman life, 31% valued human and nonhuman life equally, and none valued nonhuman life more than human life.

On the whole, female activists reported more involvement and stronger views than did male activists. Females reported longer associations with the animal rights movement ( $M = 6.5$  years) than did male activists ( $M = 5.0$  years),

$t(383) = 2.50, p < .02$ , and females were more likely (89%) than males (68%) to value nonhuman life at or above human life,  $\chi^2(1) = 19.77, p < .001$ . Roughly two-thirds of all female activists maintained a vegetarian or vegan diet, compared with only 50% of male activists,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.54, p < .01$ . Female activists were also more likely (59%) than male activists (34%) to view animal research as the highest priority issue,  $\chi^2(1) = 13.989, p < .001$ , and females were somewhat more likely (86%) than males (79%) to support the elimination of all animal research,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.98, p = .08$ .

Although this profile of activists certainly differs from the profile of nonactivists (for example, 85% of the activists supported the abolition of all animal research, compared with only 17% of the nonactivists), the picture that emerges is not adequately captured by the image most people have of animal rights activists. More than a third of the activists in this survey reported eating meat, poultry, or seafood, and nearly 40% reported buying products made with leather. Ninety-three percent did *not* report valuing nonhuman life above human life, and nearly half felt that the animal rights movement should not focus on animal research as its top priority. These results suggest that even highly committed activists vary quite a bit in their willingness to use animals for human benefit.

### ANIMAL RESEARCH ACTIVISM

Although it would be an exaggeration to portray activists who were focused on animal research as qualitatively distinct from activists who reported other priorities, there were several quantitative differences between these activists and others. Animal research activists were more likely (89%) than other activists (75%) to value nonhuman life at or above human life,  $\chi^2(1) = 11.53, p < .001$ , and they were more likely (89%) than others (78%) to advocate the elimination of all animal research,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.51, p < .007$ . Animal research activists were also more likely (59%) than other activists (46%) to view laboratory break-ins as effective in discouraging animal research,  $\chi^2(1) =$

5.56,  $p < .02$  (56% of all activists thought that break-ins would prove effective in the long run, compared with only 16% of nonactivist respondents).

When asked to rate how capable various animals<sup>1</sup> were of feeling pain (on a scale from 1 to 9, in which a "1" indicated "feel no pain" and a "9" indicated "as much as humans"), animal research activists gave significantly higher pain ratings ( $M = 8.4$ ) than did other activists ( $M = 7.9$ ),  $t(111) = 2.12, p < .04$ , and they were far more likely (62%) than other activists (36%) to believe that all animals feel pain as much as humans,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.48, p < .007$  (for comparison, the mean pain rating given by nonactivists was 7.1, significantly different from the activist grand mean of 8.2,  $t(141) = 3.11, p < .003$ ).

Regardless of their focus, most activists had a dim view of researchers who use animals. Of those activists who expressed an opinion, 87% endorsed a statement to the effect that the typical animal researcher "doesn't care about laboratory animals; views animals as expendable supplies," whereas 13% felt that the typical animal researcher "cares about laboratory animals but feels that research is needed." Female activists were particularly likely to have a negative view of animal researchers (90%, compared with 76% for males),  $\chi^2(1) = 8.84, p < .008$ . Nonactivist respondents were somewhat more positive, though they, too, expressed a fair degree of skepticism. Of those who had an opinion, 63% thought that animal researchers cared about their animals, and 37% did not.

Sixty-one percent of the activists were personally in favor of laboratory break-ins, 16% were opposed, and 23% were undecided. In comparison, 14% of the nonactivists favored break-ins, 47% opposed them, and 39% were undecided. Here also there were significant gender differences. Twenty-four percent of the male activists opposed laboratory break-

**Table 1.** What should the animal rights movement focus on most?

The Treatment of:	Activists <sup>a</sup>	Nonactivists
Animals used in research	54	26
Animals used for food	24	8
Animals used for clothing or fashion	12	22
Animals in the wild	5	30
Animals used in sports or entertainment	4	14
Animals used in education	1	0

<sup>a</sup> Figures indicate the percentage of respondents giving each answer.

1. For rating purposes, the survey grouped animals in the following categories: nonhuman primates, nonprimate mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and insects. Exemplars were provided for each category, and respondents were asked to give one rating for each of the six categories.

## Animal Rights Activists

**Table 2.** Comparison of activist and nonactivist opinion concerning psychological and medical research<sup>a</sup>

Item	Activists			Nonactivists		
	Psycho- logical	Medical	Equal	Psycho- logical	Medical	Equal
Which kind of research causes more animal suffering?	16	14	70	15	38	47
Which kind of research yields more useful information?	8	86	6	5	81	14
If one kind of research were to be eliminated and one continued, which would you eliminate?	57	43	—	62	38	—

<sup>a</sup> All figures are given as percentages. Respondents who answered "neither" or "not sure" have been excluded from analysis.

ins, whereas only 14% of the female activists did so,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.57, p < .04$ . This finding is particularly dramatic given the well-documented reluctance of women to support aggressive or illegal actions (e.g., Smith, 1984).

As seen in Table 2, activists were much more likely than nonactivists to feel that psychological research causes as much animal suffering as medical research,  $\chi^2(2) = 18.67, p < .001$ . Activists and nonactivists both saw medical research with animals as more useful than psychological research with animals, and majorities in both groups said they would rather eliminate animal research in psychology than animal research in medicine. These results may help to explain why animal research in psychology has been a target of animal rights activism.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As this brief survey makes clear, many of the views held by animal rights activists differ sharply from those held by nonactivists. According to the present results, nearly 80% of the activists valued nonhuman life as much as human life, 85% wanted to eliminate all animal research, and more than 60% were in favor of laboratory break-ins. Comparable figures for nonactivists were 31, 15, and 14%, respectively. Activists also rated animals as more capable of feeling pain than did nonactivists, though it is hard to say whether this difference was mainly a cause or consequence of activism.

At the same time, there was a wide range of opinion on many issues, and it would be a mistake to portray animal

rights activists as homogeneous. Even highly committed activists disagreed on whether laboratory break-ins would ultimately prove effective and whether such actions should be supported. They disagreed on what the top priority of the animal rights movement should be and on which type of animal research they opposed most, psychological or medical. The majority of activists (53%) reported eating meat, poultry, or seafood, buying leather products, or both. Indeed, of the 40 activists who felt that the top priority of the animal rights movement should concern animals used for clothing or fashion, fully 70% reported buying leather products. These results illustrate the diversity of opinion and practice within the animal rights movement, and they challenge the accuracy of popular stereotypes.

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