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The role of ‘public opinion’ in the UK animal research debate

Pru Hobson-West

University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

Animal research remains a deeply controversial topic in biomedical science. While a vast amount has been written about the ethical status of laboratory animals, far less academic attention has been devoted to the public and, more specifically, to public opinion. Rather than what the public think, this article considers the role of ‘public opinion’. It draws on a recent empirical study which involved interviews with laboratory scientists who use animals in their research, and with other UK stakeholders. The first section of the paper demonstrates that public opinion has become a kind of resource in the animal research debate. Public opinion polls, in particular, are frequently cited. The second section explores this further and argues that, for all sides, appealing to public opinion is a key way to show legitimacy. Finally, the paper shifts gear to consider whether public opinion should matter, both for ethical reasoning and for science policy.

The UK has a long history of public protest in relation to animals¹, and animal research remains a deeply controversial topic. In recent years it is the tactics of intimidation adopted by a small minority of protesters which have received the most headlines. The UK has even been accused of exporting ‘extremist’ tactics to the US and to mainland Europe. The use of such tactics has prompted some interesting debate about what kinds of protest can be morally justified.^{2 3} Nevertheless, most of the ethical literature considers whether animal research can itself be regarded as just. This usually involves an ethical evaluation of the moral status of humans vis-a-vis non-human animals.

Classical theorists differ in how they conceptualise this question, but are all claimed to share the Aristotelian assumption of a fundamental difference between humans and other animals.⁴ However, Peter Singer⁵ argues for animal ‘liberation’ on the basis of moral equivalence. Following Ryder,⁶ deviations from this principle are seen as ‘speciesism’. Singer’s consequentialist position is much criticised by those, such as Regan,⁷ who defends the concept of rights. According to recent high profile reports on the ethics of animal research^{8 9} these philosophical controversies remain unresolved.

Given the high scientific, policy, and media profile of this issue, it is surprising that there has been relatively little academic empirical research to investigate exactly how supporters and opponents of animal research make their claims. The reason could be historical, in that students interested in the animal research debate tend to consult the large philosophical resource that exists on animals and animal research. It could also be more practical: in the

UK at least, fears about not getting access to scientists, or even personal safety, may have previously contributed to a relative lack of academic research on this topic.

This paper draws on an empirical study which was designed to investigate how stakeholders in the animal research debate explain and defend their own position. To be clear, this is not the same as trying to ascertain their opinion or belief. Rather, the aim is to analyse the sets of claims or discourses that are used. Such an approach is powerfully defended by Susan Herbst,¹⁰ a US professor of public policy: “As a variety of contemporary philosophers and rhetoricians have argued, expression is a type of action. To ignore discourse is to gain an incomplete understanding of social and political life” (Herbst 1993, p3).

The study involved a total of 50 in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. This included senior laboratory scientists (Home Office project licence holders) at two UK universities; senior representatives of organisations who fund or support animal research; and leaders of organisations who campaign against animal research or aspects of it. The interviews were carried out in 2007 and 2008. As with most research studies of this type, participation was voluntary. Data cannot automatically be regarded as representative of ‘all scientists’ or all members of a particular organisation. With consent, all but one of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The article uses short sections of these transcripts for illustration. As will be seen, reference to public opinion was a prominent feature.

Public Opinion as a Resource in the Debate

Not surprisingly, individuals who were interviewed for the project provided very different accounts of the realities of animal research. Laboratory scientists described high welfare standards, stressed the importance of animal research to medical progress, and pointed to the strictness of UK regulation. Critical organisations talked about the suffering of lab animals, some questioned the reliability of animal models, and others argued for stronger regulation or better enforcement. In spite of these important differences, what is striking is the way in which all sides refer to public opinion. The aim of this first section is to demonstrate the use of public opinion as a strategic resource in the debate. Later sections analyse why this strategy might be employed by considering the relationship between public opinion, ethical reasoning and political legitimacy.

All interviewees were asked a series of openended questions about the policy and practice of animal research. In response, scientists spontaneously cited public opinion polls. Whilst often acknowledging a lack of recall of exact statistics, polls were still referred to as evidence of public support. To give just two examples:

I mean when I get statistics on, you know, occasionally we get information fed back about what proportion of people think that, you know, legitimate animal experimentation is acceptable. And I just can't remember what the current statistics are. (Laboratory scientist A)

I think most people understand the importance that we have to do it. I think the majority. I don't know what the figures are, but I think the majority does. (Laboratory scientist B)

Organisations that fund or represent laboratory scientists also cited public opinion polls. Unlike individual scientists, they often quoted figures in quite a lot of depth. This level of detail is unsurprising, given that some of these organisations are also involved in the commissioning of such polls. The following extract is taken from an interview with the Medical Research Council:

That's three years now the MORI poll, CMP [Coalition for Medical Progress] poll, where the total number of conditional supporters, you know, 'do you support the use of animals if suffering is minimised, done for medical benefit, and there are no alternatives?' Those are the three conditions. If you add together all the people who answered yes to one of those, it's 90%. And individually it's about 70–75% for any of those conditions. (Medical Research Council)

Reference to opinion polls is also made on the websites of groups who fund or support animal research. For example, the website of Understanding Animal Research (formerly the Research Defence Society or RDS) cites a 2008 MORI poll commissioned by a UK government department. The website summarises that "Nine in 10 accept animal experimentation to some degree, with just over half (56%) accepting the idea unconditionally, an increase of 24 percentage points since 1999".¹¹

Groups that are critical of animal research policy, or aspects of it, also referred to public opinion polls. For example, a representative of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals argued during interview that "there is a strong degree of public disquiet which is easy to identify by doing public opinion polls or whatever". Similar claims are made on websites of critical organisations. For example, the Dr Hadwen Trust, a medical research charity that funds and promotes non-animal techniques, critiques the lack of funding for alternatives by claiming that 'Public opinion polls consistently demonstrate extremely high support for non-animal research'.¹² More recently, the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) cited a YouGov poll conducted across six European countries which asked for views on the current revision of the EU directive on animal research. The website highlights key poll findings including "84% of people surveyed agree or strongly agree the new law should prohibit all experiments causing severe pain or suffering to any animal".¹³

As well as citing poll data, critical organisations also provided critiques of polling methodologies. For example, during interview the BUAV claimed that they have previously submitted a complaint over a MORI poll because the methodology was "so unbelievably flawed". Concerns about poll methodologies are also voiced in the academic literature. For example, Hagelin and colleagues¹⁴ published an overall analysis of 56 surveys on animal research. They discovered that between 27% and 100% support animal research, and a range of 0–68% people are opposed. Part of the explanation for this dramatic variation is due to design issues, for example how questions are phrased. A full discussion of the methodological debates would require a whole other article. For present purposes, what is important is that poll data is cited (and critiqued) by a wide range of actors including scientists, funders and organisations critical of animal research. This is evident on websites as well as from interview data. The implication is that public opinion has become a key battle-ground in the animal research debate.

Other studies confirm that this use of public opinion data is not just confined to animal research. For example, in discussing the UK debate about genetically modified food, Alan Irwin¹⁵ argues that “public opinion is both elusive and open to multiple constructions, including claims and counter claims about what the public ‘really’ thinks and what the ‘real public’ might be”. While interesting to a sociologist, for others this ‘claim and counter claim’ can be seen as highly frustrating. For example, in looking at human-animal hybrid embryos, the UK Parliamentary Science and Technology Committee complained that “we find it unhelpful that witnesses on both sides of the argument have claimed to represent the public view, where supporting evidence for this is lacking”.¹⁶ One response is to commission yet more polls or spend time attempting (in vain) to adjudicate between competing claims about public opinion. Another response is to step back and ask why: why is it that public opinion, often in the form of polls, is used as a resource in the debate?

Why is Public Opinion Used as a Resource in the Debate?

There are at least three explanations for why public opinion is used as a resource in the animal research debate. While these are separated for purposes of discussion, in practice they are highly interrelated and difficult to disentangle.

The first reason is that citing public opinion research is a convenient way for individuals and organisations to show rationality. This is because of the scientific aura that surrounds public opinion data, and quantified poll data in particular. Given that the animal research debate often seems polarised and full of emotion, participants in the debate almost seem to cling to opinion poll data as something apparently rational and objective. People who claim to act on the basis of such data can then claim to be acting efficiently. To take an example from the interview data, RDS argued that:

All we do is use them [opinion polls]. I mean we don’t use them in a way that we’re generally accused of, to kind of prove a point so much. We generally use them to guide our kind of activities, as it were, in terms of, you know, how we couch the debate. (RDS)

While the use of formal tables of public opinion began in the city states of ancient Greece, it is only since the 18th century that quantification became a significant part of political discourse in the West. This arguably reflects the dominance of instrumental reasoning, and the way in which quantification is held up as the most efficient way to achieve a variety of ends.¹⁰

The second explanation is that public opinion data are used to communicate moral legitimacy. While a minority of scientists argued that they were uninterested in public debate, the following interview extract is more typical. This lab scientist argues that it is public opinion that gives him the authority to conduct experiments, rather than any kind of ethical theory of human rights or human superiority.

Well I don’t feel I have the right as an individual to go and experiment on animals. I think that right comes from public opinion... I mean I don’t see how you could have an argument, a logical argument that says that our rights are

more important than others, but I think that argument comes from a reflection of public opinion would be my take. (Laboratory scientist C)

What is interesting here is that the speaker does not draw on their status as professional expert to provide legitimacy to their scientific work, but the sense that their actions are supported by the majority of the public. The clear implication of this account is that their own actions (using animals for medical experiments) are morally justifiable. This point, about the relationship between ethical reasoning and public opinion, will be returned to in a later section.

There is a third, related, explanation for why public opinion is used as a resource in the animal research debate: namely, that participants are trying to convey a kind of democratic legitimacy. By claiming that their arguments or actions are supported by mass public opinion, the idea is that they have some sort of democratic mandate. The corollary of this is that actions which are not supported by majority opinion are politically illegitimate. Indeed, this kind of discourse was widely used by organisations that are critical of animal research. The following extract is from the Dr Hadwen Trust.

Science should never be, and scientists should never consider themselves as being, outside a societal framework. They operate with the agreement of the public and with the agreement of the public's representatives in parliament. They should be responsive to public concern...I don't think any human activity should be entirely beyond society's influence. (Dr Hadwen Trust)

In summary, this section has established that there are at least three explanations for why public opinion data are used as a resource in the debate. These categories are somewhat crude, and, as already stated, highly interrelated. After examining the existing literature, I agree with Herbst¹⁰ that “theory about the ways that quantitative data are employed in public life is sorely lacking” (Herbst 1993, p41). More theoretical work on this question is therefore needed, and may improve our understanding of why opinion poll techniques are so dominant. Nevertheless, this section has at least determined that public opinion is about far more than what the public think: it is a key means to show legitimacy. This finding applies to those with very different views on the ethical acceptability of the use of animals in medical research.

Should Public Opinion Matter?

Having established that public opinion data plays an important role in the animal research debate, the final question is should public opinion matter? One way of approaching this is to think about the process of ethical reasoning. It is possible to argue that public opinion is irrelevant for assessing whether a particular action is ethically justified. For example, a recent article¹⁶ on British public attitudes to the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos discusses poll data in significant detail but only briefly notes that, “Of course, the fact that the public supports or opposes something is not enough, on its own, to settle the ethical or political question”. Another article in *JME*,¹⁷ this time on attitudes to euthanasia and suicide, also notes that “public opinion cannot be the final arbiter of ethics”. This question is dealt with in more detail by Garrard and Wilkinson¹⁸ who argue that while public opinion

should be taken into account when framing policy, “there is no necessary connection between what ‘society thinks’ about any given issue and the moral truth of the matter”. The authors stress that “it is not clear why ethicists should care about the fact that ‘90% of people disapprove of x’”. Likewise, Sheehan criticises the tendency in policy discourse to equate public opinion with ethics. Instead, he argues, public opinion (like any set of facts) matters ethically, sometimes.¹⁹

We can test this point using the case of animal experimentation. For example, a utilitarian may argue that we definitely should take public opinion into account when assessing the ethical legitimacy of animal research. If we do not, there could be riots on the street, which would lead to additional harms and a reduction in overall utility. However, a utilitarian in the next office may cite empirical evidence that public opinion is fickle, and that we should not take it into account because this would result in an eternally unstable science policy. Likewise, a rights based approach to ethics could demand that the public have a democratic right to have their views on animal research taken into account, regardless of the consequences of doing so. However, a rights based perspective could also claim that the public has a right to the best possible medical care, and that lay views on how medicines are produced are ethically irrelevant. In summary, it is difficult to argue that a particular ethical perspective necessarily equates to a particular role, or lack of role, for public opinion.

Another way to address the normative question is to ask whether public opinion should be considered relevant for public policy. This is a fundamental issue for social and political science and one that cannot be comprehensively discussed here. Nevertheless, a crucial first step is to distinguish between public opinion, and public opinion data. In any democratic system, the will of the people must be taken into account. Indeed, I would go further to argue that regular parliamentary elections are not enough: the public should have a more direct influence on the direction of specific policies related to science and technology, including animal research.

However, this does not mean that public opinion polls are the best method for ensuring that this occurs. Many social scientists have voiced concern about the health of contemporary democracy, and the need for some sort of ‘democratic renewal’.²⁰ This partly explains a trend towards more qualitative, participatory techniques, for example, via the 2003 GM Nation debate in the UK.²¹ Another strategy is to deliberately include ‘lay’ people in decision-making structures. This is already visible in the case of animal research. In the UK, local ethical review processes are used to evaluate research proposals from laboratory scientists. It is now considered best practice to include a lay member in such processes.²² While these and other attempts at democratic innovation should be broadly welcomed, it is important to recognise that whatever technique or mechanism is used, the public and their views will still be used as a crucial route to legitimacy by political elites, and by other participants in contemporary controversies.

Conclusion

In contrast to the large volume of literature which considers the ethics of animal research, the aim of this paper was to discuss the way in which those involved in the UK animal

research debate actually make their claims. The results should be of interest to all those who follow the animal research issue, or other debates on controversial topics related to medical research. They may also be of interest to those who are trying to articulate, defend or critique the relationship between empirical research and bioethics.²³

Section one was largely descriptive and confirms that public opinion, particularly public opinion polls, are frequently cited (and commissioned) by all sides. It is predicted that this would also hold true in other Western countries, although this would need to be empirically established. One strength of this particular research study is the wide range of interview participants. Close comparison between the interview transcripts has enabled common themes, rather than the oft-quoted disagreements, to be identified. Of course, this is not to deny that important differences do remain, for example, about the way that non-human animals are conceptualised. I also cannot confirm or reject the possibility that the way an individual talks about public opinion is influenced by their own position on the ethical status of animals.

The second section of the paper was more analytical and suggested reasons why public opinion polls are so frequently cited. These relate to a desire to communicate rationality, moral legitimacy and democratic authority. According to the empirical study, all sides in the debate appear to do this. In short, the role of 'public opinion' in the animal research debate is to provide legitimacy in a highly contested domain. It is not an exaggeration to say that public opinion polls have become relied upon as a kind of technology of legitimacy. While the social scientific critique of polling is extremely valuable, much more academic attention needs to be paid to the way in which public opinion data is actually used in the public sphere, once it leaves the polling company or news desk. This conclusion also applies to the pages of journals such as this one. Next time you read an article on medical ethics which quotes public opinion data, notice whether and how these are used to try and persuade you of the legitimacy of the argument.

The final section of the paper explored whether public opinion should matter. While I could not find a vast amount of literature that deals with this question, I agree with those who suggest that public opinion does not automatically tell us what we should do. In terms of policy, some have argued that 'the arguments' must prevail, when these come into conflict with majority public opinion.¹⁸ However, my study suggests that this dichotomy between 'arguments' and 'public opinion' is too simplistic. When making policy, governments do not weigh up arguments in the abstract but must try to determine whose arguments to trust, including whose account of 'the public' to believe. Stakeholders in the animal research debate are not only engaged in a battle of ideas, but also a battle for legitimacy. Public opinion or, more accurately, the idea of public opinion, will no doubt continue to play a crucial role in the latter.

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