

What do people see when they watch pets, farm animals or animals in the wild? Do they capture individual features and discriminate the animal from other of their kind or do they just see general categories: such as cats, dogs and pigs? Studies on social perception show that people perceive others' individual characteristics when they include them to a common group ("we"). In contrast, the classification of a person to a different, unfamiliar group ("they") results in a very general, categorizing perception of an individual (e.g., we see merely his/her gender, nationality or socio-economic status). Consequently, people's memory for faces depends on whether the face belongs to an in-group member or an out-group. In this project we propose to utilize social-cognitive approach to expect that most animals may be considered to be out-group members and thus their individual features may be ignored. As a result of this ignorance it may be easy to use animals instrumentally and put a blind eye to their suffering (e.g., in meat industries).

The aim of this project is threefold. First, we want to estimate a specific pattern of perception associated with animals' individualization (vs. categorization). We would carry out studies that employ eye-tracker to capture adult's and children's gaze and eye-movements while watching animals' faces (e.g., in comparison to human faces). Second, we want to know who is more inclined to individualize rather than categorized perceived animals. We expect that adults who do not eat meat, has increased empathy for animals and/or ascribe human-like qualities (e.g., intentions, free will, complex emotions) to animals would individualize animals more. We also expect that urban children may individualize animals more than rural children. Last but not least, we will examine whether individualized perception of animals decreases willingness to instrumentally use them (e.g., consume meat). We expect that both animals' anthropomorphism and individuation decrease tendency to instrumentally use them. More specifically, we expect that inclusion of animals into the scope of humanness (i.e., anthropomorphism) leads to more individualized perception that in turn decreases willingness to use animals instrumentally (e.g., eat them).

Parallel lines of research on adults and children enable to compare developmental differences in children's and adults' animal perception and their attitude toward animals. Growing interest of people in pro-environmentalism, animal rights, and their growing concern for well-being of farming animals poses new questions that should be answered. However, in scientific psychology there is little theoretical understanding of why people do (or do not) form personal relationships with animals, take care of their well-being and abstain from instrumental use of animals (i.e., meat consumption). In this project we expect to show that cognitive process of individualized perception of an animal may explain observed differences in attitudes and behaviors toward animals.