

Perspectives of animal welfare volunteers regarding veterinarians and veterinary inspectors in Latvia

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Abstract. This study examines the beliefs and attitudes of animal welfare volunteers in Latvia towards veterinarians and veterinary inspectors, with the objective of shedding light on the intricate dynamics within these relationships. This study, utilising qualitative research through ten semi-structured interviews, uncovers divergent perspectives on the relationship between volunteers and veterinary professionals. Volunteers express a largely negative attitude towards veterinary inspectors, highlighting deficiency in empathy, insufficient action on concerns about illegal breeders, and punitive actions against volunteers for regulatory noncompliance. In contrast, their attitude towards veterinarians is more nuanced, encompassing both anger because of treatment costs and an acknowledgment of common objectives with certain veterinarians, especially younger professionals who exhibit dedication to animal care. The results indicate that the volunteers' emotional commitment to animal rescue and beliefs about vets and veterinary inspectors markedly affects their interactions with them, resulting in difficulties in cooperation with the abovementioned persons. The findings highlight the vital need for improved communication and collaboration, and recommend examining prevalent ethical viewpoints about companion animals, as well as analysing the historical impact of legislation and societal norms on perceptions of animal welfare, which could enhance the discourse among stakeholders.

Key words: veterinarians, stray animals, veterinary inspectors, homeless animal volunteers, animal welfare.

Introduction

In March 2019, a consortium of 24 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and animal welfare charities in Latvia issued a petition addressed to the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), the President, the Ombudsman, and various ministries. The authors attribute the current dramatic situation in animal welfare, characterised by numerous violent incidents and the unregulated sale of kittens

authors suggest that the roots of volunteers' conflicts with veterinarians and FVS inspectors are in the realm of everyday interactions. In Latvia, activists refer to themselves as volunteers; so, we shall use this term hereafter.

To identify research gaps, searches of the peer-reviewed articles in databases of Science Direct and Scopus were conducted. For volunteer-veterinarian relationship we used the following keywords "volunteer AND veterinarian," "volunteer AND veterinarian AND relationship," "volunteer AND veterinarian AND attitude," "activist AND veterinarian," "activist AND veterinarian AND relationship," and "activist AND veterinarian AND attitude". For volunteer-veterinarian inspector we used the following keywords "volunteer AND veterinarian AND inspector," "volunteer AND veterinarian AND inspector AND relationship," "volunteer AND veterinarian AND inspector AND attitude," "activist AND veterinarian AND inspector," "activist AND veterinarian AND inspector AND relationship," and "activist AND veterinarian AND inspector AND attitude". Since there were no satisfactory results for this study, the keyword "shelter" also was added to the search.

The Scopus and Science Direct search results yielded no peer-reviewed original research articles examining homeless animal volunteers' views towards veterinarians. In previous studies the relationship between homeless animal help volunteers and veterinary doctors are mostly studied from the perspective of veterinarians (Almcrantz *et al.*, 2024; Biele, 2012; Cobb, 2016; Hearing *et al.*, 2021; Šeiko *et al.*, 2024). Important contradictions can be named: 1) poor organisation of volunteers and increased workload on clinics because of homeless animals (Cobb, 2016); 2) lack of transparency and respect in interaction with vets (Hearing *et al.*, 2021); 3) conflicting expectations about finances and ethics (Almcrantz *et al.*, 2024); 4) perceiving volunteering as a form of commerce (Šeiko *et al.*, 2024). The discourse about veterinarians who prioritise business above assisting volunteers was observed in the media of non-governmental groups (Keith, 2014) and on veterinary practitioners' webpages (Avery, 2020; Herbst, 2019; Roark, 2017).

Nonetheless, the search uncovered publications regarding pet owners' perceptions of veterinarians. Volunteers who bring a stray animal to the veterinary clinic are not its owners in the strictest sense, mostly due to the absence of a lasting emotional connection with the animal, but can be perceived as an owner because of their motivation, so the findings of this study can be applied to our research as well. Beverland *et al.*, (2008) outline two categories of

ownership motivation: intrinsically motivated owners who care about companion animal's welfare because of its individuality, and extrinsically motivated owners who perceive an animal as their personal status symbol. It can be argued that the volunteer, who legally possesses a homeless animal during a visit to the clinic, may be classified as the first category of the owner due to their motivation to care for the animal (Davis, 2013; Ford, 2016; Fournier & Mustful, 2019; Neumann, 2010; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). The

to include the terms “veterinary AND inspector AND non-governmental,” nevertheless it has not produced any more results. Anneberg *et al.*, (2012) examined the experiences of livestock farmers during veterinary inspections and discovered that farmers frequently perceive these inspections as unjust due to their unannounced nature, the application of disparate standards across farms, and varying interpretations of legislation and the significance of animal welfare. The inspectors were perceived as emissaries from an external realm, rendering them incapable of accurately assessing the situation. While the volunteers whose rescued animals are kept in their apartments differ from farmers, the authors proposed that these findings may be beneficial for future research.

It can be argued that the viewpoints of volunteers assisting homeless animals regarding their interactions with veterinary experts are mostly underexamined. The current literature primarily emphasises veterinarians’ perspectives, overlooking the perceptions and involvement of volunteers in these interactions. Furthermore, the engagement between volunteers and veterinary inspectors, especially regarding the implementation of animal welfare legislation, is another vital domain deficient in empirical research. This knowledge could promote a transformation in societal perceptions of animals, contributing to the redefinition of ethical standards and expectations regarding animal treatment and welfare, and fostering the development of more nuanced and effective animal welfare laws and policies that consider the realities faced by organisations directly involved in promoting animal welfare.

This assumption gives rise to two research questions:

- 1) How do homeless animal help volunteers perceive the role of veterinarians in promoting the welfare of homeless animals?
- 2) How do homeless animal help volunteers perceive the role of FVS inspectors in protecting animal rights?

The aim of the study is to examine and understand the perceptions of homeless animal help volunteers regarding veterinarians and FVS inspectors in Latvia, specifically focusing on the roles of veterinarians and FVS inspectors in advancing animal welfare and protecting animal rights.

The study of the relationship between the groups is structured around the positive and negative attitudes and beliefs of volunteers in Latvia assisting homeless animals, shaped by their everyday interactions with veterinarians and veterinary inspectors. The analysis uncovers the complex perceptions of the aforementioned groups, grounded in emotions, assumptions and personal experiences.

Materials and Methods

The research was carried out from 2022 to 2024 and utilised a qualitative methodology. Based by

and data recording. The ethical considerations for this study were set in accordance with the guidelines outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

A total of ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with volunteers involved in the care of homeless animals in Latvia. The criterion for completing data collection was the concept of saturation (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). The transcripts were coded and analysed immediately after the interviews, enabling the ending of interviews when no further insights were derived from the data collection (Hennink *et al.*, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were performed in the informants' original languages, namely Latvian or Russian. The interviews were coded in their original language, as the author is bilingual, which prevented misleading interpretations of terminology.

Results

Relationship with veterinary inspectors

The negative attitude and moral outrage towards inspectors are closely linked to the beliefs of volunteers. Jasper & Poulsen (1995) described the so-called "moral shock", i.e. a trigger for engagement in any action because of a sense of outrage provoked by an event or situation. Osório (2016) observed that moral outrage, caused by political injustice, is typical for animal rights activists. As helping homeless animals is linked to social justice, scholars have described activists' emotional investment in an action of bringing change (Barry & Dordević, 2007; Effler, 2010). Our research appears to confirm this observation. The relationship pattern reveals that interactions with veterinary inspectors, such as inspections at volunteers' residences housing rescued animals or responses to volunteers' complaints regarding puppy mills, are characterised by negative feelings indicated by all respondents. No affirmative sentiments regarding FVS inspectors have been identified. Seven informants criticised inspectors for their failure to address volunteers' concerns about illegal breeders.

Volunteer 2: "We receive only excuses... Because no one was home, they couldn't check, or in our complaint we didn't say what floor or apartment number it was at."

Three informants believe that inspectors lack empathy and do not share the affection for animals exhibited by volunteers. Five interviewees assert that inspectors neglect complaints due to laziness and a reluctance to leave their comfortable offices, while another five propose that their inaction stems from

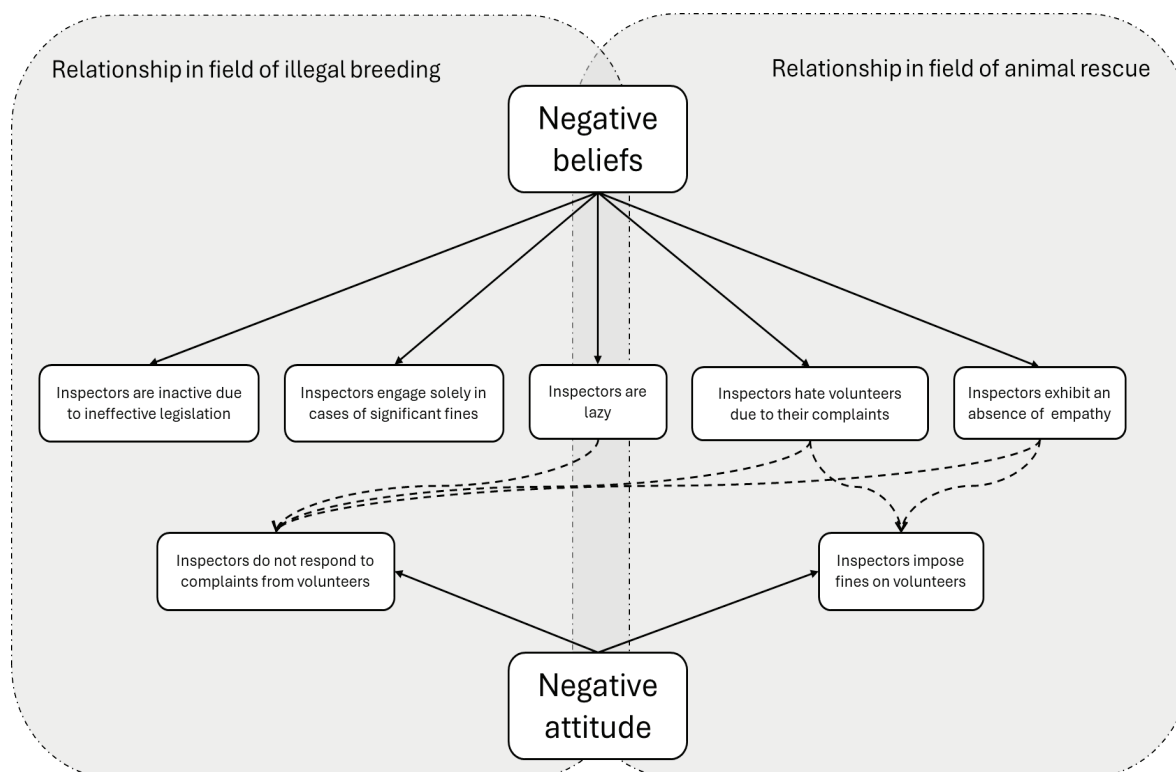


Figure 1. Relationship map with FVS inspectors.

differ in their methodologies regarding the welfare of animals. The atmosphere of distrust stemming from volunteers' inequitable attitude towards the FVS and rooted in perceptions of institutional inertia and bias, hinders legislative cooperation.

Relationship with veterinary doctors

The relationship with veterinarians appears to be more complex than that with veterinary inspectors. The attitudes and ideas of volunteers are shaped by the treatment of homeless animals in veterinary clinics. Five respondents attributed the negative opinion towards veterinarians to their insufficient involvement in therapy, while three informants cited excessive treatment expenses as a contributing factor.

Volunteer 6: "The vet will not pass judgment if we are late with payment in case the work is his life's

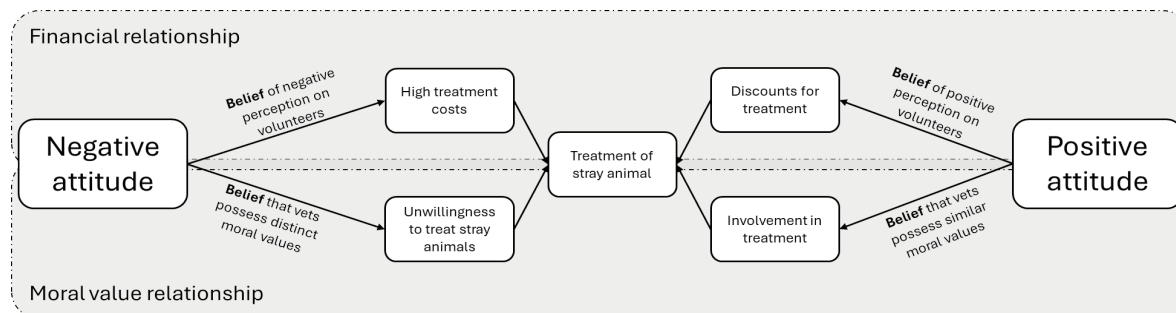


Figure 2. Relationship map with veterinary doctors.

Volunteer 3: “They fight with us for each life”.

The results show that volunteers’ attitude is neither positively nor negatively prejudiced; rather, their experiences with various clinics affect them in diverse ways. Four informants expressed the idea that veterinarians are forthcoming because they perceive volunteers as allies in the battle against animal maltreatment. Six informants noted the open-mindedness of young doctors, who share identical views on the moral value of animals. These beliefs align with the harmonious triad idea proposed by Rötzmeier-Keuper *et al.*, (2018), which is founded on shared values between the owner and the specialist toward an animal, as well as a mutual objective of medical treatment.

Volunteer 7: “Vets are helping us, especially those who sterilise; we share the same views. Our goal is to stop overpopulation of stray animals. We are practically colleagues.”

The attitudes and beliefs of volunteers regarding veterinary doctors might be represented schematically (Figure 2).

The relationship between volunteers and veterinarians is complex, influenced by a range of experiences that are both positive and negative due to individual contacts in veterinary clinics. This interplay reflects wider disputes evident

inferred that limitations pertaining to the geographical location of participants did not exert a substantial influence on the outcomes of the investigation. Volunteers may tend to portray their experiences in a manner that aligns with social desirability, particularly when engaging in conversations related to emotionally sensitive subjects, and it can impact the veracity and comprehensiveness of the data gathered during the interview process. Future research could be enhanced by incorporating a wider array of subjects, encompassing individuals from diverse geographical settings (rural versus urban) and several types of animals. This would facilitate a more thorough understanding of the complexities that characterise volunteer-veterinarian and volunteer-inspector relationships.

A potential venue for further research has been identified. Do veterinarians, veterinary inspectors and volunteers have common perspectives on the moral value of companion animals, and are these perspectives impacted by an individual's background, such as age, higher education during the Soviet era, or prior occupation? From an alternative viewpoint, it may be intriguing to examine the influence of 20th-century legislation and norms on animal abuse inside Latvian society.

Subsequent research endeavours should aim to show the dynamics between volunteers and inspectors affiliated with the Food and Veterinary Service. Specifically, these investigations should prioritise the examination of inspectors' perspectives on the fundamental entitlement of homeless animals to life, their attitudes towards volunteers, and their level of involvement in animal welfare advocacy. Evaluating the extent of their accountability, obstacles encountered, and possible avenues for enhancement can aid in bolstering the overall efficacy of animal welfare endeavours. This approach would aim to identify societal elements that impede the mitigation of violence directed towards animals.

As the research findings reveal that volunteers' perceptions are closely linked to the social justice concerns, this has significant practical implications, especially in shaping animal welfare policy and promoting collaboration among key stakeholders in Latvia. Lawmakers must acknowledge the significance of grassroots volunteer initiatives and integrate their perspectives into legislative revisions, guaranteeing that animal welfare regulations not only seek to save companion animals, but also empower frontline social movements. Furthermore, the revealed negative perceptions should motivate legislative representatives to establish a more empathetic and collaborative framework between volunteers and professionals. This may entail creating training

programs for veterinary inspectors that prioritise empathy, communication skills, and comprehension of the distinct issues encountered by volunteers in animal rescue situations.

The study suggests that the interaction between homeless animal help volunteers and veterinary inspectors is primarily negative, characterised by moral outrage and frustration among volunteers. Volunteers view inspectors as passive, devoid

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