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Tracing the Profile of Animal Rights Supporters: A Preliminary Investigation

ABSTRACT

A question about the “moral rights” of nonhuman animals in the 1993 and 1994 General Social Survey (GSS) effected an understanding of some of the demographics of those supporting animal rights. This study checked results against related questions concerning attitudes toward animal testing and meat consumption. The stereotypical profile of an animal rights supporter is female, well educated, upper-middle class, middle-aged, and white. The data in this study do not support the stereotype. Instead, the young, non-black minorities, and the less educated were more likely to support animal rights; income was not a significant predictor. Other predictors examined included religious denomination, frequency of church attendance, and attitudes toward environmental protection. This study’s findings suggest the need to rethink “post-materialist” and “post-citizenship” theories about who supports animal rights. This paper also points the way toward future studies to examine the causal linkages between the predictors and animal rights attitudes.

Much attention has been paid recently to animal rights attitudes and activism, as social scientists continue to heed Flynn’s (2001) call to integrate non-human animal studies and human-animal relations into our fields of study. Many people today appear willing to support some sort of rights for animals.

In a 1995 poll conducted by the Associated Press, two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement, “‘an animal’s right to live free of suffering should be just as important as a person’s right to live free from suffering’” (Flynn quoting Agnew, p. 78). In this study, close to one-third of the respondents (827 people of 2,771) agreed that “animals should have the same moral rights that human beings do.”

This study uses the statement about “moral rights” and two other related questions asked in the General Social Survey (GSS) published by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC, 2000) to explore the demographic characteristics of animal rights supporters. The GSS is a cross-national annual personal interview survey of American households. Conducted by NORC, it asks hundreds of broad and varied questions to thousands of randomly selected respondents. Data for this study were drawn from the GSS to create a database of respondents from 1993 and 1994, the years in which the “moral rights” question appeared.

Animal Rights Supporters—Evidence of a Profile?

A profile seems to be consolidating about the supporters of animal rights. Again and again, it has been shown that women are more supportive of animal rights than are men (Gallup & Beckstead, 1988; Galvin & Herzog, 1992; Kruse, 1999; Nibert, 1994; Peek, Bell, & Dunham, 1996; Plous, 1998; Uyeki, 2000). Other features of the stereotypical profile indicated by previous research include being white, middle-aged, well educated (at least a bachelor’s degree), and upper-middle class (Galvin & Herzog; Lowe & Ginsberg, 2002; Plous).

Inglehart (1997) argues in his thesis of “post-materialist values” that new values have recently emerged in certain groups because they have achieved material security. Now in a position to care about others and have concerns beyond their personal needs, these people attempt to extend rights and promote acceptance of different lifestyle choices beyond their current acceptable boundaries. Franklin, Tranter, and White (2001) argue that, if such is the case, we would expect support for animal rights to be higher among members of the stereotypical profile described above, whom Inglehart identifies as those in a position to adopt post-materialist values. Such a demographic profile also fits with the typical “post-citizenship” movement participant described by Jasper (1997).

Yet, there have been challenges to the stereotypical profile: Franklin et al. (2001) argue that pro-animal rights attitudes are becoming more diffuse across categories such as age, race, class, and education. Although virtually every study still finds women more supportive than men of animal rights, some large-sample surveys find income to be unrelated to animal rights' attitudes. Minorities, the less educated, and the young are more likely to be supportive of animal rights (Franklin et al., 2001; Nibert, 1994; Peek et al., 1996; and Uyeki, 2000). This study will weigh in on a debate about the demographics of animal rights supporters. Using a large national survey, this study has a robust sample from which it can make an important contribution to the "profile debate."

Flynn (2001) argues that "the Judeo-Christian tradition contributes to the norms that enable humans to mistreat animals" (p. 79). This study seeks to test empirically this statement by seeing if people who are members of Judeo-Christian denominations or frequently attend church are less likely to support animal rights than those who are not religious, belong to "nontraditional" religions, or do not attend church. Previous evidence for this hypothesis can be found in Galvin and Herzog (1992), Kruse (1999), Nibert (1994), and Peek et al. (1996).

There is growing evidence of a connection between "pro-environment" attitudes and "pro-animal" attitudes (Kruse, 1999; Peek et al., 1996; and Uyeki, 2000). The GSS contains a battery of questions about environmental attitudes and activism. This study will look for evidence of such a relationship.

Data and Method

Dependent Variables

After excluding cases containing missing values on one or more of the variables (732 respondents), the study examined the characteristics of 2,081 respondents who answered "yes" or "no" to the statement, "animals should have the same moral rights that humans beings do." Originally, the statement was a five-point Likert-type question; for comparison in a logistical regression, however, it was turned into a dichotomous variable. "Agree" and "strongly agree" were grouped together as supporting animal rights while "disagree" and "strongly disagree" were grouped together as not supporting animal

rights. Those who were neutral (542 respondents) have been excluded from the analysis. The same technique was used to recode, "it is OK to test on animals to save human lives" into a yes/no question (418 excluded). The third dependent variable, "refuse to eat meat for moral reasons," was also recoded: Those who answered "always" and "often" were grouped as being morally against meat consumption; those who answered "sometimes" and "never" were grouped as not morally opposed to meat consumption.

Independent Variables

This study used sex, race, education, age, and total family income to explore the post-materialist and post-citizenship theses. To examine the effect of religion on support for animal rights, the study used items about religious denomination and frequency of church attendance. Eight environmental attitude and activism questions were employed to examine a "pro-environment" stance as a predictor of support for animal rights (Table 1). Note that GSS 1994 was a split-ballot survey, so 1,655 respondents in that year did not receive the questionnaire containing the dependent variables used in this analysis.

Table 1. Frequencies of the Demographics and Opinion Items

Variable	Frequency	Percent (valid)	Mean	St. Dev.
Age			46.00	17.15
Young	1,383	30.2		
Middle-aged	2,198	47.9		
Old	1,006	21.9		
Race				
White	3,830	83.3		
Black	567	12.3		
Other	201	4.4		
Sex				
Male	1,975	43.0		
Female	2,626	57.0		

Table 1 (cont.)

Variable	Frequency	Percent (valid)	Mean	St. Dev.
Education (years completed)			13.12	3.00
Less than HS	801	17.5		
High school +	2,699	58.9		
Bachelor +	1,084	24.7		
Religious preference				
Protestant	2,799	61.1		
Catholic	1,110	24.2		
Jewish	92	2.0		
Other	157	3.4		
None	420	9.2		
Frequency of church attendance				
Never	740	16.4		
Rarely	1,862	41.3		
Regularly	656	14.5		
Often	1,251	27.7		
Animals should have the same moral rights as people				
Strongly agree	168	6.1		
Agree	659	23.8		
Neutral	522	19.6		
Disagree	963	34.8		
Strongly disagree	439	15.8		
Refuse to eat meat for moral reasons				
Always	76	2.6		
Often	204	7.1		
Sometimes	594	20.6		
Never	2,008	69.7		
OK to test on animals to save human lives				
Strongly agree	400	14.4		
Agree	1,435	51.7		

Table 1 (cont.)

Variable	Frequency	Percent (valid)	Mean	St. Dev.
Neutral	418	15.0		
Disagree	357	12.9		
Strongly disagree	168	6.0		

**** four yes/no questions were asked related to environmental activism:**

1. Respondent is a member of an environmental group
2. Have given money to an environmental group
3. Have signed an environmental petition
4. Have participated in an environmental demonstration

**** four other five-point scale environmental questions were asked:**

1. I do what I can to help the environment
2. I try to buy chemical-free produce
3. I try to drive less to help the environment
4. I recycle

Nominal variables were converted into “dummy” variables for logistical regression analysis. In regression, one value from each nominal variable, usually the most frequently occurring value, is taken as the reference category against which the other “dummy” categories are compared. Race was recoded into “dummies” for (a) black, (b) white, and (c) other. Unfortunately, these are the only easily managed categories in the 1993, 1994 GSS. Those who select “other” are asked to write in their ethnicity. The reference group was “whites.”

Religious denominations were categorized as (a) Catholic, (b) Protestant, (c) Jewish, (d) Other, and (e) None (no religion), with Protestants as the reference group. Educational categories were (a) less than high school, (b) high school degree, (c) some college, and (e) bachelor’s degree or higher. Those with a high school degree served as the reference group.

Three age groups were identified: young (<18-34), middle-aged (35-55), and old (56 +). The middle-aged were the reference group. The age categories were employed for the sake of parsimony, as significant effects were not found for more discrete categories. The stereotypical animal rights supporter

is middle-aged; once this category was created, making general comparative categories became a simple matter.

After recoding responses into the above categories, the new variables were analyzed using logistical regression, the tool of choice when working with dichotomous dependent variables. The recoded “moral rights” has only two values: for supporters (1) and for non-supporters (0); the same is true for the animal testing and meat questions. This technique illuminates which predictors have a significant relationship ($p < .05$) to the dependent variable and shows the direction of that relationship, while controlling for all other independent variables used in the model. Logistical regression also calculates an odds-ratio score, the factor by which the odds of a particular value of the dependent variable occurring change when the independent variable increases by one unit (in the case of nominal variables like race, a “change by one unit” means a change from the value of the reference category to the independent variable in question). The greater the odds-ratio number (e^b), the greater the particular independent variable influences the odds of the outcome of a certain value of the dependent variable. Negative “B” values indicate a decreased likelihood to support animal rights.

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the analyses for the “moral rights” variable. Only significant relationships are listed, and the reference category for each nominal variable is in parentheses. Taking the post-materialist and post-citizenship profile as the assumption, one would expect to find that those more likely to support “moral rights” for animals (herein referred to as “animal rights”) are female, middle-aged, white, well educated, and affluent.

As expected, males were significantly less likely than were females to support animal rights; we can see, however, that the other characteristics of the stereotypical profile are not supported. Against the expected profile, “other race” was strongly tied to an increase in support of animal rights compared to whites (blacks, too, were more likely than were whites to support animal rights, although the relationship is not quite significant at the .05 level). Against the expected profile, young people were more likely than were the middle-aged to support animal rights; compared to high school graduates,

those with a bachelor’s degree or higher were less likely to support animal rights; those with less than a high school degree were more likely to support animal rights. In addition, the expected association between total family income and support for animal rights was not observed.

Once frequency of church attendance was controlled for, there was no significant relationship between religious denomination and support for animal rights, although the Jewish and “other religion” categories are close to being significantly more likely than Protestants to support animal rights. Evidence, however, was found for the hypothesis that church attendance correlates negatively with support for animal rights.

Several of the “environmental” variables were significant: Members of an environmental group or who give money to an environmental group, claim to do what they can to help the environment, and buy chemical-free produce are all more likely to support animal rights than are those who do not support the above activities. The overall model explained about 14% of the total variance of the dependent variable, and knowing the values of the significant predictors allows for prediction of about 18% of those who support animal rights.

Table 2. Animals should have the same moral rights as humans
(Logistical regression analysis)

Model Summary					
Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square		
1	2481.124	.095	.139		

Classification Table^a					
Observed		Predicted		Percentage	
		YESRIGHT	1.00	Correct	
Step 1	YESRIGHT	.00	1504	92	94.2
		1.00	535	116	17.8
Overall Percentage					72.1

^a The cut value is .500

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>E^B</i>
Sex						
Male (female)	-.517	.103	25.351	1	.000	.597
Race						
Other (white)	.665	.225	8.764	1	.003	1.945
Age						
Young (middle-aged)	.510	.112	20.830	1	.000	1.665
Church attendance						
(never)						
Rarely	-.309	.148	4.354	1	.037	.734
Regularly	-.459	.192	5.745	1	.017	.632
Often	-.866	.173	25.096	1	.000	.421
Education						
<high school (HS diploma)	.635	.147	18.710	1	.000	1.886
Bachelor's +	-.615	.145	18.087	1	.000	.541
Give money to environmental group						
Yes (No)	.245	.105	5.447	1	.020	1.277
Member of environmental group						
Yes (No)	.433	.176	6.052	1	.014	1.543
I do what I can to help the environment						
	.277	.062	13.500	1	.000	.797

Table 2 (cont.)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>E^B</i>
I try to buy chemical-free produce						
	.154	.050	9.403	1	.002	.858

Insignificant predictors: Black (compared to White); Catholic, Jewish, "Other," None (compared to Protestant); Old (compared to Middle-aged); Some college (compared to High school diploma); Signed an environmental petition (compared to Non-signer); Took part in an environmental demonstration (compared to Non-participants); Try to drive a car less to help the environment; Try to recycle; and Income.

Again, when looking at the above table, the greater the odds-ratio number (e^b), the greater the particular independent variable influences the odds of the outcome of a certain value of the dependent variable. Being a member of the "other race" category was the most significant predictor of support for animal rights, followed by having less than a high school degree, being young, being a member of an environmental group, giving money to an environmental group, buying chemical-free produce, and doing what one can to help the environment. The most significant predictors of being unsupportive of animal rights are rarely and regularly attending church, followed by being male, having a bachelor's degree or higher, and often attending church.

Two other questions pertaining to nonhuman animal welfare were examined to aid in verifying the results obtained from the question on "moral rights" and to attempt to construct a more encompassing measure of support for animal rights. One question asked whether one abstains from eating meat for "moral reasons," while the other asked if one agrees that it is acceptable to experiment on animals if human lives will be saved. Both these questions are phrased in ways that could influence the results, and it is questionable how directly related they are to supporting animal rights. Such limitations are elaborated below, and it is for these reasons that both questions were relegated to a secondary part of the analysis of support for animal rights. These two questions and the "moral rights" question were incompatible as a scale.

Examining the regression model on animal testing reveals a relatively high amount of consistency between the results and those of the "moral rights"

model (Table 3). Being male, attending church, and having a bachelor’s degree or higher are associated with being more likely to condone animal testing than their reference groups (variables are listed in terms of the magnitude of effect on the dependent variable). These same groups were less likely to support “moral rights” for animals. The young (compared to the middle-aged), those who have given money to environmental groups, and those who try to buy chemical-free produce are all more likely to be against animal testing (again, listed in order of magnitude of effect). These groups are the same ones who were more likely to support “moral rights” for animals. Being a member of the “other race” category and having less than a high school degree, however, are not significantly associated with the animal testing question (as they are with the “moral rights” question). The model explained 10% of the total variance.

Table 3. It is OK to test on animal to save human lives
(Logistical regression analysis)

Model Summary			
Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	1993.582	.063	.103

Classification Table^a					
	Observed		Predicted		Percentage
			NOTESTS	1.00	Correct
Step 1	NOTESTS	.00	1822	11	99.4
		1.00	402	10	2.4
	Overall Percentage				81.6

^a The cut value is .500

Table 3 (cont.)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>E^B</i>
Sex						
Male	-.454	.120	14.369	1	.000	.635
(Female)						
Age						
Young	.353	.128	7.565	1	.006	1.423
(Middle-aged)						
Church attendance						
(Never)						
Rarely	-.464	.167	7.749	1	.005	.629
Regularly	-.856	.230	13.795	1	.000	.425
Often	-.518	.190	7.448	1	.006	.596
Education						
(HS diploma)						
Bachelor's +	-.858	.172	24.971	1	.000	.424
Give money to environmental group						
Yes	.260	.120	4.675	1	.031	1.297
(No)						
I try to buy chemical-free produce						
	.307	.058	28.253	1	.000	.736

In looking at the regression model for those who refuse to eat meat for moral reasons (Table 4), again there is a fair amount of consistency with the results and those of the “moral rights” model. New relationships also emerge. Being Jewish was the most significant predictor of refusal to eat meat, followed by having no religion, being a member of the “other religion” category, being black, being a member of an environmental group, being a member of the “other race” category, claiming to do what one can to help the environment, driving less to save the environment, and trying to buy chemical-free produce. The only variable negatively correlated with refusing to eat meat for moral reasons was being male. This model explained close to 24% of the variance.

Table 4. Refuse to eat meat for moral reasons
(Logistical regression analysis)

Model Summary

Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	1153.538	.107	.235

Classification Table^a

	Observed	Predicted			
		DONTEAT	1.00	Percentage Correct	
Step 1	DONTEAT	.00	2112	17	99.2
		1.00	185	26	12.3
Overall Percentage					91.4

^a The cut value is .500

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>E^B</i>
Sex						
Male (Female)	-.659	.174	14.389	1	.000	.517
Race						
Black Other (White)	.082 .657	.229 .297	12.230 4.883	1 1	.000 .027	2.230 1.929
Religion						
Jewish None Other (Protestant)	1.578 .810 .806	.380 .272 .349	17.198 8.859 5.333	1 1 1	.000 .003 .021	4.845 2.249 2.240

Table 4 (cont.)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>E^B</i>
Member of environmental group						
Yes	.778	.225	11.979	1	.001	2.177
(No)						
I do what I can to help the environment						
	.213	.103	4.258	1	.039	.808
I try to buy chemical-free produce						
	.621	.081	58.229	1	.000	.537
I try to drive less to help the environment						
	.367	.094	15.283	1	.000	.693

Discussion

The data confirm the near universal finding that women are more likely than men to support animal rights. However, the data do not support the expected stereotypical profile of Inglehart's (1997) post-materialist thesis and Jasper's (1997) post-citizenship activist. The findings are more in line with Franklin et al. (2001) and Uyeki (2000) who see a diffusion of support for animal rights across diverse populations. In this study's sample, young persons, less educated individuals, and non-black minorities were more likely to support animal rights than were the middle-aged, those with a bachelor's degree or higher, and whites.

These findings have important implications for future research. Did the animal rights supporter once fit the stereotypical profile but recently shift? If so, why? Why is there increased support for animal rights among women and minorities? Peek (1996) provides an hypothesis worth examining: that oppressed groups have a heightened awareness of, and concern and empathy for, other oppressed groups such as animals. Unfortunately, the present study does not get at the causal mechanism behind the difference; there are no variables in the 1993, 1994 GSS that directly tap into feelings of oppression.

Why are the young and less educated more likely to support animal rights? In terms of age, it may be a cohort effect: The young persons in this sample

from 1993-1994 grew up during the “golden age” of civil rights, feminism, and various other “rights” movements; possibly, many participated in them.² They may extend rights to nonhuman animals more readily than older people, who were not a part of such movements. Regarding education, younger persons with less education may be working on their degrees; In addition, it may be that animal rights support is more a part of youth culture than it was in the past. If the post-materialist hypothesis is incorrect or not applicable to many supporters of animal rights (such as those mentioned above who are younger and less educated), then we need to construct alternate theories that take into account the variation.

The findings on religion indicate that frequency of church attendance is more important than religious denomination (not a significant predictor) in decreasing one’s likelihood to support animal rights. This suggests that certain religious doctrines may contain, implicitly or explicitly, messages that can be perceived as unsupportive of animal rights; the more one is exposed to these doctrines through church attendance, the less one is likely to support animal rights. Selecting a sample of religiously committed people and asking a battery of questions about their views on animals and how religion has shaped those views would help us understand the causal mechanism.

The finding of a positive correlation between certain “pro-environment” variables and support for animal rights is not surprising. The two movements seem to overlap to a certain degree, and the association has been found in other studies (Kruse, 1999; Peek et al., 1996; and Uyeki, 2000).

There are limitations and problems with this study that extended research can remedy. Kruse (1999) points out that the dependent variable statement about “moral rights” is general and leaves much room for interpretation. Some may interpret the statement very narrowly as meaning only that animals have the right to be free from torture. Others may interpret it broadly as meaning that animals deserve all the rights enjoyed by humans. Although the question as worded seems to favor the latter interpretation, that so many respondents agree with the statement suggests that they interpreted the statement narrowly. Given the limited number of vegetarians and animal rights activists as well as the generally accepted position of animals as forms of property, it would be quite shocking for so many people to see animals as equal to humans. It also is questionable how accurately the dependent variable

reflects the attitudes relevant to those who see themselves as supporters or advocates of animal rights.

The questions about meat consumption and animal testing were more problematic than the “moral rights” question. As to whether the respondent feels it is permissible to test animals if the testing could save human lives: Posing the question in this way likely compelled some respondents to compare the worth of an animal’s life to that of a human and may have led even those generally against animal testing to see it as permissible. That fewer people were willing to disagree that animal testing is acceptable if human lives are saved (19%) than were people willing to support animal rights (30%) provides evidence for such an interpretation. The other question pertained to a refusal to eat meat “for moral reasons.” Without a clear definition of what meat includes (only beef; poultry; fish; pork?) and whether the moral reasons are in support of animal rights or are religious in origin, the question was problematic. That being Jewish or a member of the “other religion” category was positively correlated with refusal to eat meat lends credence to an interpretation by those groups that is religious and not merely supportive of animal rights. However, the findings on the animal testing and meat consumption variables generally lend support to the results of the “moral rights” analysis and do not contradict those results in any way.

A battery of questions directly tapping attitudes toward animal rights, instead of just one direct question and two somewhat indirect questions, and a comparison of activists and non-activists would give us a clearer understanding of what it means to answer “yes” to such a statement about moral rights for animals. This consideration leads to the possibility of a difference between those who merely have an attitudinal disposition toward supporting animal rights and those who, through their behavior, actually advocate for animal rights.

Although minorities, the young, and the less educated may be more likely to agree with the statement, they still could be less likely to get involved in activism. Thus, it could be true that animal rights activists fit Inglehart’s (1997), Jasper’s (1997), and Plous’ (1998) stereotypical profile while attitudes are dispersed differently. There was no way to identify animal rights activists in the 1993, 1994 GSS, but those who participated in activities that this study recognized as environmental activism basically match the demographics of

the animal rights supporters—not the stereotype (the same was found by Uyeki, 2000).

There are no attitudinal variables in the 1993, 1994 GSS questions about lifestyle satisfaction, place in the world, and components of a meaningful life question that would directly tap into Inglehart's (1997) post-materialism thesis. Thus, finding concrete support for, or firmly discrediting, the thesis with the data is problematic. Under such constraints, this study was forced to follow Franklin's et al. (2001) recommendation to examine variables expected to be found among one holding post-materialist values, such as having a high income and being well educated, white, and middle-aged. This is, at best, a crude approximation of the post-materialist thesis.

That this study's model explains only 14% of the variance means that there is much for which we cannot account. Future studies should seek to uncover other significant predictors such as Nibert's (1994) research on the relationship between human and animal welfare. Kruse (1999) suggests that people who own pets may be more likely to support animal rights and that worker occupation, cultural aspects, and social networks and relations should be taken into account as well. Peek (1996) notes a strong link between activism and pet ownership; unfortunately, however, no data on pet ownership were available in the 1993, 1994 GSS (1993, 1994). Peek also points to the need to examine how structural location, socialization forces, and personal experience affect animal rights attitudes.

In short, there is some evidence of a diffusion of animal rights attitudes across age, race, and education; but this study has described only some of the demographics of supporters—it has not explained the relationships. Examining if, and how, these attitudes translate into activism would point to the significance of such attitudes.

The issue of why women, more than men, support animal rights also is far from settled. It would be interesting to do a follow-up study—now that it is 10 years after the GSS survey that asked questions relating to animal rights—to see whether there are more supporters of animal rights and if the demographics have changed. Of the sample in this study, 30% supported moral rights for animals; but the field is ripe for examining what it actually means to the individuals who agree with the statement and for uncovering the other 86% of the variance that explains why they answered yes.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, more and more social scientists are examining human-animal relations in a variety of ways—studying attitudes, activists, and human-animal interaction. I hope and expect that many of the issues and questions raised in this paper will be tackled in the near future and lead to an increased understanding of attitude formation regarding support for animal rights. This study has been just what the title has claimed—a preliminary investigation carried out to orient future research, which will aim to use more numerous and accurate variables.

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Notes

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- ² I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

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