Improving animal welfare: qualitative and quantitative methodology in the study of farmers’ attitudes

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Abstract

The welfare of production animals provokes wide social discussion among the public, yet, despite this, farmers’ voices and their representations of animal welfare are rarely heard, even though farmers are the ones actually able to improve animal welfare. Farmers’ perceptions of what constitutes animal welfare and how it may be improved can differ from those of consumers and other stakeholders, and therefore it is crucial to understand what farmers mean when they talk about improving animal welfare. To chart farmers’ perceptions, we conducted qualitative interviews and a questionnaire study using the theory of planned behaviour as a conceptual framework. We found that the farmers perceived the improvement of animal welfare as four specific, practical attitude objects (providing animals with a favourable environment; taking care of animal health; treating the animals humanely; and taking care of the farmer’s own well-being) and two different but often overlapping general attitudinal dimensions (the instrumental and intrinsic evaluations of animal welfare). The farmers’ intentions to improve animal welfare were best explained by their attitudes towards the specific welfare-improving actions. The concept of the improvement of animal welfare examined in this study outlines measures to improve animal welfare from the farmers’ point of view and discusses their influence. Our study demonstrates that by adapting a valid conceptual framework and applying relevant qualitative and quantitative methods that support each other, we are able to elucidate the underlying meanings and values in farmers’ views on improving animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitude, farmer, production animal, qualitative attitude approach, theory of planned behaviour

Introduction

Production animal welfare provokes wide social discussion, particularly when the media are dealing with the current disadvantages of animal production. Consumer concern exists as to the welfare of animals on farms. However, farmers’ voices and their representations of animal welfare are rarely heard. Whether the farmers, consumers, and other stakeholders are all talking about the same issue when they talk about improving animal welfare is open to debate. The welfare of animals can be defined in many ways (as in Brambell 1965; Millman 2009); understanding how different actors perceive it is a precondition for the successful improvement of animal welfare.

The attitudes of consumers (Frewer et al 2005), veterinarians (Heleski et al 2005; Sabuncuoglu & Coban 2008), and students (Heleski & Zanella 2006) concerning animal welfare have been well studied (Serpell 2004). For production animals, however, the most relevant attitudes are those of the farmers. The farmer, as a caregiver, has a vital influence on animal welfare (Coleman et al 2003; Hemsworth 2003). It is acknowledged that the attitude and behaviour of the caregiver has an effect upon animal behaviour, welfare, health, and production (Rushen et al 1999; Waiblinger et al 2002; Boivin et al 2003). Yet, research on farmers’ representations of and traditions of conceptualising animal welfare was scarce until recent years (Velde et al 2002; Lund et al 2004; Austin et al 2005; Lassen et al 2006; Bock & van Huik 2007). In particular, few studies from the perspective of improving animal welfare as an action have been published (Waiblinger et al 2002).

Our study aims to contribute to the development of robust theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of farmers’ attitudes towards animal welfare. In our paper, we introduce two approaches to the study of attitudes in connection with animal welfare: two different ways to collect and analyse the data associated with two different theoretical traditions. The first tradition is Icek Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour (TPB; Ajzen 2002), which represents the mainstream research tradition with its mainly quantitative survey methods. In addition, we present a qualitative