Do farmers and scientists differ in their understanding and assessment of farm animal welfare?

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Abstract

In response to an increased public awareness regarding how livestock are reared, animal welfare scientists have attempted to develop new methods of welfare assessment at the farm level. Furthermore, in recent years they have increasingly moved away from the conventional approach of evaluating the provision of resources necessary to ensure good welfare, and have instead focused on the use of animal-based measures of welfare. In contrast, it is believed that farmers use mostly resource-based and management-based measures (eg the provision of food, water and housing) when assessing the welfare of their animals. They also seem to be driven more by economic and financial concerns than by the welfare of the animals per se, when it comes to the provision of animal welfare.

Different approaches to the definition and assessment of farm animal welfare were explored in work carried out at Newcastle University as part of the Welfare Quality® project by both social and welfare scientists. Social scientists explored farmers’ perceptions and understanding of animal welfare, whilst welfare scientists developed animal-based measures of welfare for use in a prototype on-farm welfare monitoring system. Based on two separate surveys, this paper focuses on UK farmers’ perception and understanding of animal welfare and their criteria of assessment in contrast with those employed by welfare scientists, using a specific case study of pigs. Results show that, despite scientists being unaware of the findings from the farmer survey, they produced a set of measures to assess welfare which were very similar to those used by farmers. However, ‘instinctive’ terms used by farmers to describe (positive or negative) animal behaviour did not bear any relation to more objective welfare measures. Compared with conventional monitoring systems which focus more on the provision of resources to promote good welfare than on the animal itself, the prototype monitoring system may be more acceptable to farmers given that it uses similar animal-based measures to assess welfare to those they use themselves, and furthermore, the focus is on the animal.

Keywords: animal-based measures, animal welfare, farm assurance schemes, pigs, qualitative behaviour assessment, welfare monitoring system

Introduction

Although ‘animal welfare’ is a widely used term, there is no agreed definition for it and how it should be measured (Barnard 2007). There is, however, a consensus amongst animal welfare scientists regarding its complexity and multi-dimensional nature (eg Duncan & Fraser 1997; Fraser et al 1997; Fraser 1999; Scott et al 2001; Sandoe et al 2003; Fraser & Weary 2004; Duncan 2005). The multi-faceted issues of the animal welfare concept lie within the nature of the animal welfare science as per se, an inter-disciplinary work, which includes (inter alia) the study of husbandry and human-animal interaction (Lund et al 2006). It is actually the link to humans and their understanding of animals, especially in relation to feelings, needs and natural behaviour, that makes animal welfare a more intricate concept. As physical, mental and natural aspects of welfare can sometimes conflict, the concept is also subject to practical and ethical challenges (Buller & Morris 2003; Hewson 2003). Additionally, at the society level, the definition incorporates the “cultural developments of the societal view about the relations between man and animals” (Carenzi & Verga 2009). Hence, “the term can mean different things to different people” (Hewson 2003).

Scientists examine animal welfare from various individual and disciplinary angles (Bock & van Huick 2007), and the definition and assessment of welfare often reflects the researchers’ background (Carenzi & Verga 2009). For example, welfare scientists (throughout this paper welfare scientists refer to natural scientists) examine the concept from an ‘animal’s point of view’, trying to understand how different livestock production practices affect the well-being of animals, whereas social scientists study ‘animal welfare from a human point of view and into the concerns and interests of citizens and consumers’ (Bock & van Huick 2007). Yet, the assessment of animal welfare from ‘an animal’s point of view’ is subject to debate as most ‘tradi-