Animal welfare: establishing a dialogue between science and society

M Miele*, I Veissier†, A Evans† and R Botreau‡

* School of City and Regional Planning, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3WA, UK
† INRA, UR1213 Herbivores, F-63122 Saint-Genès-Champanelle, France
‡ Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: MieleM@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

Farm animal welfare has become an important issue for the European public, especially in the last two decades when a number of crises (e.g., Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Avian Influenza) have affected farm animal populations. Public concern about this issue led the European Union to fund the Welfare Quality® project. This project aimed to develop a protocol for assessing animal welfare on farms and at slaughter plants, to identify the main animal welfare problems, and to address possible welfare improvement strategies. In fulfilling these aims, the Welfare Quality® project incorporated inputs from both science and society. This was crucial, as the public perception of what constitutes 'animal welfare' sometimes differs from animal science-based definitions. Furthermore, these differences are often interwoven with broader variations in ethical- and value-based understandings about human/non-human animal relationships. This paper presents the steps that we adopted to establish a dialogue between science and society during the construction of the Welfare Quality® assessment protocols. This dialogue involved numerous interactions between animal scientists, social scientists and members of the public. These interactions took several forms, including: meetings, conferences, workshops, websites, newsletters, interviews, focus groups, and citizen and farmers juries. Here, we address four key moments within this dialogue: the development of the initial list of twelve welfare criteria; the consumer focus groups; the development of the Welfare Quality® scoring system; and the citizen juries. In particular, we focus on the results of the focus groups and citizen juries. The focus groups were conducted in France, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Hungary and the citizen juries were carried out in Italy, the United Kingdom, and Norway. Drawing on this research, we highlight the similarities and differences between societal understandings of farm animal welfare and the views of scientific experts. Furthermore, and crucially, we outline how the animal scientists took account of societal opinion when developing their farm animal welfare assessment tools.

Keywords: animal welfare, citizen juries, focus groups, science-society dialogue, welfare assessment, welfare criteria

Introduction

In this paper, we describe how we attempted to establish a dialogue between the scientists of the Welfare Quality® project (who were working on developing both a standardised method for assessing farm animal welfare and a scoring system that could classify farms according to their results) and broader ‘society’ (in this case, key ‘stakeholders’, and likely end-users of the scoring system, such as representatives of NGOs, farming organisations, retailers and consumer groups, as well as selected members of the public). Before describing the techniques that we adopted for promoting this dialogue and the results that we obtained, we want to give a brief overview of the context in which this dialogue took place.

This is an interesting time in the history of farm animal production and consumption in Europe. Economic growth coupled with rapid scientific advances and technological change in Europe over the last 40 years has had remarkable impacts on farming practices. Confined systems of housing quickly replaced traditional extensive, outdoor systems of rearing animals, especially in the case of pigs and chickens (for the latter it is now estimated that 95% of European production consists of indoor, confined systems), while 60% of cattle are farmed in intensive systems (Fraser 2008; Miele et al. 2009). These changes greatly increased the availability of animal foods and they affected daily practices of food consumption and purchase for the majority of European households. Technological innovations in animal farming have raised expectations for both the increased availability of larger quantities of food at lower prices and also for increased food safety and quality (Evans & Miele 2007; Kjarnes et al. 2007). The rapid growth of meat consumption represents the most striking effect of these changes: since 1970, the consumption of meat has increased from 56 to 89 kg per person per year on average in Europe, 89 to 124 kg in the USA and from 4 to 54 kg in China (Millstone & Lang 2003). However, recent studies of European consumers show that “between one-third and one-quarter of consumers...