A pilot investigation of Farm Assurance assessors’ attitude to farm animal welfare as a confounding factor to training in pig welfare outcome measures

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Abstract

The effect of Farm Assurance (FA) assessors’ attitude to farm animal welfare on the inter-observer reliability of some welfare outcome measures achieved following training was investigated as part of a larger project examining the feasibility and benefits of the incorporation of some on-farm welfare outcome assessments into UK Pig Farm Assurance Schemes. A total of thirty-one FA assessors were trained in three training sessions to assess the following welfare outcome measures: body lesions, tail lesions, severe tail lesions, lameness and pigs requiring hospitalisation. Assessment of photographs, live observations of individual pigs and pens of pigs were used to generate inter-observer reliability data. A previously validated farm animal welfare questionnaire was used to assess the FA assessors’ attitudes to farm animal welfare. Principal component analysis of FA assessor scores for this questionnaire resulted in two major components, with component 1 termed ‘pigs have mental welfare’ and component 2 termed ‘people-centric, pigs as profit’. FA assessors demonstrated a range in attitudes to farm animal welfare and, when assessing the same pigs, recorded a range in prevalence of welfare outcome measures and degree of agreement with a gold standard following training. There were only seven out of a possible 98 significant correlations between the FA assessor scores for components 1 and 2 and their recorded prevalence of welfare measures and levels of agreement with a gold standard. In particular, FA assessors scores for component 1 were significantly positively correlated with the recorded prevalence for pigs requiring hospitalisation in two of the three training sessions although there was no effect on the agreement with a gold standard for this measure. These results indicate that training in welfare outcomes, defined by a standard protocol, is relatively unconfounded by observer attitudes to farm animal welfare. To obtain better levels of agreement between assessors, and therefore more reliable data, it is recommended that FA schemes concentrate their resources on providing good quality training in a well-defined protocol and reliability testing rather than on trying and that they do not need to attempt to account for the attitudes of the FA assessors to farm animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitude to animals, farm assurance, inter-observer reliability, pig, welfare outcome

Introduction

Farm Assurance (FA) aims to provide assurances to the market over food safety, animal welfare and environmental concerns and was initiated by the UK pig industry more than a decade ago (Main & Green 2000). Farm Assurance standards for assessing welfare have, up to now, been mainly based on an assessment of the resources available to the pigs, such as the quality of the physical environment and stockmanship (welfare inputs). It is recognised that assessing welfare outcomes, such as direct observations of an animal’s behaviour and physical condition, may be better able to give an insight into how the animal experiences the effect of the inputs (Main et al 2007). For example, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) report (FAWC 2005) recommends that Farm Assurance schemes:

“work towards refining their standards and inspection procedures to achieve an increasing inclusion of welfare outcomes, so as to provide both a better reflection of the welfare of the animals within a production system and the level of stockmanship on the farm”.

This study was part of a larger project examining the feasibility and benefits of incorporating some on-farm welfare outcome assessments into the harmonised UK Pig FA Schemes, run by Assured British Pigs (ABP) and Genesis Quality Assurance (GQA) (ABP 2007; GQA 2007). Trained FA assessors audit these standards on farms, spending part of their time observing a sample of the pigs. In order to record reliable data for the whole farm when formally including welfare outcomes into FA schemes, it is important that the sample of pigs observed is sufficiently representative of the farm as a whole (see Mullan et al 2009), that the assessment is not affected by factors such as the time of day (see Mullan et al 2011) and that there is consistency of assessment between FA assessors (Keeling 2007).