Human-animal relationships in the Norwegian dairy goat industry: attitudes and empathy towards goats (Part I)

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Abstract

The quality of human-animal relationships in the livestock industries has been increasingly recognised as an important determinant of animal welfare. Attitudes and empathy are multi-dimensional traits that may be associated with the stockpersons’ behaviour. The aim of this study was to determine the dimensionality of the goat-oriented attitudes and empathy of stockpeople in the Norwegian dairy goat industry. We also explored how empathic and attitudinal dimensions are interrelated, and how the demographic background variables may predict empathy and attitudes. A total of 260 dairy goat farmers participated in the study, by the means of either postal or internet-based questionnaire formats. Multi-item rating scales were developed specifically for the assessment of attitudes and empathy towards goats, and Principal Component Factor Analysis was conducted to determine the dimensionality of the farmers’ goat-oriented attitudes and empathy. Subsequently, linear and ordinal regression analyses were performed to explore the interrelationships. The analyses revealed dimensions of empathy that can be recognised from studies of human-oriented empathy, and attitude dimensions that can be interpreted similarly as dimensions described in studies from other livestock industries. Our results show that different dimensions of attitudes and empathy were associated with different demographic variables, and that each empathy dimension was associated with a different attitude factor.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, dairy goats, demographics, empathy, human-animal relationships

Introduction

Stockpeople have a fundamental role in safeguarding the welfare of the animals in their care. Competency, motivation, attitudes and certain personality traits have been identified as job-related prerequisites for ensuring high farm animal welfare standards (Hemsworth & Coleman 2011). Human communication with or towards animals, particularly vocal communication, can be an indication of the human’s attitudes towards animals (Boivin et al 2003). Attitude has been defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (Eagly & Chaiken 2007). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the intention to perform a behaviour is stronger the more favourable the attitude with respect to that behaviour is (Ajzen 1991). Attitudes are learned dispositions (Hemsworth & Coleman 2011) that can change depending on context, and the person holding the attitude may or may not be aware of it (Eagly & Chaiken 2007). Attitudes are based on cognitive, affective and behavioural information and can differ in both valence and strength (Maio & Haddock 2009). Cognition refers to what a person believes to be true about an object, while affect refers to the emotional response towards the object (Hemsworth & Coleman 2011). The behavioural component refers to tendencies to behave in a particular way, which may reflect underlying attitudes (Hemsworth & Coleman 2011). The attitudes and behaviour of stockpersons will be affected by their initial experiences in the livestock industry (Hemsworth 2007), and stockpersons with positive behaviour towards animals have positive attitudes both towards the animals and towards the conditions under which the animals are kept (Boivin et al 2003).

It is also important for a stockperson to recognise positive and negative emotions in animals. Empathy is a dispositional characteristic, but it has been debated whether it is an innate or a learned trait (Hemsworth & Coleman 2011). It is believed to be a complex, multi-dimensional concept consisting of both cognitive and affective components. The cognitive components refer to the ability to interpret and