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Conducting sensitive social science research about on-farm animal welfare incidents: challenges and approaches

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Abstract

The social sciences can help provide a deeper understanding of human-farm animal relations. However, social science research exploring problematic human-farm animal interactions can be of a sensitive nature. Studies that carry risks for participants and the researcher are known methodologically as sensitive research. However, there is little discussion in the animal welfare sciences on how best to conduct research of this nature on animal owners, despite recommendations being made for more interdisciplinary collaboration between the animal welfare sciences and social sciences. Drawing on social science research conducted in 2012 on the human element of on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland, this short communication presents a case study of the sensitivities and challenges involved in carrying out social science research related to farm animal welfare. This communication details the steps involved in recruiting participants, the methodological challenges encountered, and the approaches used to overcome these challenges. Our experience suggests that when conducting socially sensitive research, careful consideration needs to be applied to the recruitment process, and the study design must aim to minimise the potential risks for all involved. Professionals in the field, such as veterinarians, can play an important role in outlining some of the implications involved, and in overcoming research challenges. Understanding the challenges to this form of research will help to maximise research potential.

Keywords: animal welfare, human-farm animal relations, participant recruitment, sensitive research, social science, the Republic of Ireland