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

C Devitt*, P Kelly†, M Blake‡, A Hanlon§ and SJ More*

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

Introduction

There is growing recognition of the benefits of an interdisciplinary research approach in the animal welfare sciences. Collaboration with the social sciences can improve our understanding of the role of human behaviour and human-animal interactions in influencing animal welfare standards (Lund et al 2006; Carenzi & Verga 2009). However, social science research carried out by the authors, Devitt et al (2013, 2104, 2015) and others (Andrade & Anneberg 2014) points out that from a research perspective, investigations into problematic human-animal interactions on the farm are of a highly sensitive nature. Research “in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research” (Sieber & Stanley 1988), is known methodologically, as socially sensitive research, and includes topics such as mental health issues, experiences of abuse, violence, or death. Sensitive research can also include research about farmer behaviour that is not compliant with mandatory legal requirements (for example, see Bronner et al 2014). Challenges associated with this area of research include difficulties in recruiting participants, the potential for: i) emotional distress for participants as painful experiences are recalled; and ii) mistrust of the researcher and research objective, and concealment of perspectives and experiences by participants during data collection (McCosker et al 2001; Dickson-Swift et al 2008a). Difficulties including exhaustion and having to manage their own emotional response can also arise for the researcher when listening to research participants’ challenging or emotional stories, when commencing with data collection and when data collection is concluding, or when trying to manage the boundaries between the researcher and participant (Brannen 1988; Dickson-Swift et al 2007, 2008b). Consequently, researcher self-care is advised (Dickson-Swift et al 2007). Despite these challenges, the value of an interdisciplinary approach is apparent in a number of studies investigating farmer-animal interactions (for example, Hemsworth et al 2000, 2010; Kielland et al 2010; Kauppinen et al 2012). As