Animal welfare during a period of intensification: The views of confinement and alternative pig producers

M Molnár*†‡ and D Fraser§

† Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy, Central European University, 1051 Budapest Nádor utca 9, Hungary
‡ Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy, Central European University, Quellenstraße 51-55, 1100 Vienna, Austria
§ Animal Welfare Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia, 2357 Main Mall, Vancouver BC, Canada V6T 1Z4
* Contact for correspondence: mariann.zs.molnar@gmail.com

Abstract

In Hungary, where intensive and non-intensive pig production co-exist, in-depth interviews were used to explore the views and priorities of pig producers regarding animal welfare and ethical animal production. Farmers using confinement systems and those with alternative, non-confinement systems shared certain core values such as attachment to animals and to traditional community values. Both groups agreed on most key elements of animal welfare (health, nutrition, etc) but had different priorities for how to achieve these within their production systems. Alternative producers considered unconfined, semi-natural environments important for animal welfare, and confinement producers with medium-sized operations (400–600 sows) generally agreed. Only the three largest producers (> 1,000 sows) expressed strong confidence in confinement methods. Different producers emphasised different features for ensuring animal welfare. Producers with large-scale confinement systems depend strongly on staff and automation and require the means to find and retain good staff. Those with medium-scale confinement systems see automation and personal involvement with animals as crucial, and they need economic conditions that allow herd size to remain within their personal capacity. Those operating alternative systems see small herds and non-confinement systems as crucial for animal welfare and need markets that encourage such systems. Subsidies, regulatory systems and technological developments would need to be tailored to meet the different needs in order for producers to improve animal welfare in the different systems and according to their own values and priorities. Medium-scale confinement producers could better act on their values if economic conditions allowed them to use more natural systems.

Keywords: animal welfare, confinement, ethics, intensification, pig, values

Introduction

Social scientists have carried out substantial research into the values and beliefs of animal producers and of the general public regarding animal welfare and the ethical raising of farm animals. In general, producers using intensive, indoor production systems have been found to emphasise physical health as the key element of animal welfare, and express confidence in confinement systems to safeguard health through hygiene, controlled environments and biosecurity. They also frequently cite the efficient growth and productivity of animals in such systems as evidence of good health and hence good welfare (eg Te Velde et al 2002; Lassen et al 2006; Vanhonacker et al 2008; Miele et al 2011; Spooner et al 2014a).

In contrast, producers using alternative, non-confinement systems — including organic systems — tend to associate good animal welfare with animals living under reasonably natural conditions including access to the outdoors (eg Lund & Röcklingsberg 2001; Verhoog et al 2004; Lund 2006).

When asked, many members of the public adopt this view of animal welfare and assume that animals must experience poor welfare if confined indoors under artificial conditions (eg Te Velde et al 2002; Lassen et al 2006; Vanhonacker et al 2008; de Rooij et al 2010; Spooner et al 2014a).

This stark division of opinion tends to create an impasse to improvement. Those changes that confinement producers would support — especially those that contribute to health and productivity — appear little valued by their customers or the general public. The major overhaul of production that would be required to meet the public perception of animal welfare is seen by mainstream producers as both unfeasible and contrary to animal welfare as they conceive it. And most consumers seem unlikely to pay a substantially higher price for products from alternative production systems (Verbeke 2009).

The research that lies behind this understanding has mostly been carried out in western Europe and the English-speaking countries where the move toward large-scale, specialised confinement systems is far advanced. A valuable