

Utilitarian and moralistic farmers take equally good care of animal welfare in Finland



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A study of Finnish Farmers' attitudes towards production animal welfare revealed that a variety of attitudes and management practices can lead to equally good result regarding animal health, productivity and welfare. Organic farmers differed from conventional farmers in providing animals better chances for a pleasant life. They also perceived they could improve animal welfare more than other farmers.

There is a body of evidence that farmers' attitudes may affect their behaviour towards animals (see for example Hemsworth & Coleman, 1998). Aggressive treatment of animals may in turn cause fear, stress and aggression in animals and thus reduce productivity. On the basis of this insight, it becomes apparent that farmer's positive standing and good treatment of animals not only makes his/her farm more profitable, but it also works the other way around by giving positive feedback to the farmer.

Interviews and observations on farms

We wanted to study the relationship of farmers' attitudes and animal welfare on 18 farms from different parts of Finland. They were 9 cattle farms and 9 pig farms. They included large and middle-sized, organic and corporative farms.

Since most of earlier attitude studies have been quantitative surveys (Coleman et al. 2003), we instead interviewed farmers and attempted to this way gather new information about their attitudes

towards improving farm animal welfare, not captured by earlier surveys. We presented the farmers with statements about currently controversial issues in animal farming today. We were interested in knowing (1) how farmers define farm animal welfare, (2) which reference groups they refer to, (3) how they perceive their possibilities to improve welfare and (4) if they have intentions to improve animal welfare.

In addition to the interview, we made a rough estimate of welfare of cows and pigs on each farm. Estimates were based, for example, on animals' living environment, technological solutions on farms, methods used in taking care of animals, and animals' behaviour and expressions of fear and aggression. We divided our

observation data into six separate categories loosely applying those presented in Bartussek's (1999) animal needs index: locomotion; lying area; social contacts; light, air and noise; feeding; and management and care.

After scoring each category, we summed scores altogether and came into an adapted farm-specific estimate of animal welfare at farm level. We then compared these welfare scores with farmers' attitudes to find out if they were related.

Animals as "a productive unit" or animals as "humans"

We discovered that farmers in our sample conceptualized farm animal welfare in two different ways. The major part of farmers perceived animal welfare in utilitarian terms as productive business. These "utilitarian farmers" were interested in the productivity of the whole farm where a single unproductive animal could be replaced with a productive one. The second view instead perceived animal welfare in moralistic way: animals were referred to as if they were humans and the most important issue was to provide an animal with a good life. These "moralistic farmers" perceived animals as individuals, gave them names and regarded emotional bonds to animals as important and rewarding to their own work. These two attitudes were frequently overlapping: farmers could use both attitudes at the same time.

Farmers also expressed attitudes according to whether they "could" and "could not" improve animal welfare. "Could" attitude was associated with moralistic view of animal welfare. It referred to small-scale daily practices such as talking to and touching an animal. "Could not" attitude was frequently associated with utilitarian view of animal welfare. It referred to large-scale activities which involved money, planning, external net-

works, employing extra workforce and access to information. Farmers mentioned renovations of buildings on farm, increasing the number of animals or investments on new technology. Farmers also emphasized throughout the interviews that animals' welfare was strongly dependent on farmers' own welfare.

Are farmers' attitudes and farm animals' welfare related?

Variation in the welfare scores between farms was considerable, but we did not find any significant connections between attitudes and different farms, housing and management systems. However, organic farmers in this sample perceived that they had more chances to improve farm animal welfare than other farmers. This positive view correlated with a better score in locomotion and in total sum, although the scoring system certainly stresses locomotion in organic farms. It seems that organic farmers have adopted such practices which, along with organic farming regulations, already allow farm animals better circumstances regarding welfare.

Another interesting finding – there was no connection between farmers' moralistic and utilitarian conceptualizations of animal welfare and animal welfare scores. This suggests that farm animals may have equally good (or poor) welfare housed by either a "moralistic farmer" or a "utilitarian farmer". From farmers' perspective improving productivity may partly work as a tool for improving farm animal welfare as well even if for consumers it might be difficult to conceive (Bjerke, Odegardstuen & Kaltenborn, 1998). Yet the small number of respondents limits us to draw any generalized conclusions.

Our following step is to conduct a larger quantitative survey of relations between Finnish farmers' attitudes, and health

and productivity of their animals according to a national production animal database. We aim to find links between attitudes and practices of different farm and management types. By studying the connection between attitudes, animal welfare, productivity and profitability we can find methods to motivate farmers to improve animal welfare. In addition, we can increase the mutual understanding between different interest groups (farmers, consumers, veterinarians, researchers, politicians) working around farm animal welfare, and thus resolve potential conflicts between them. ■

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