



NORDIC ISAE 2010

**Proceedings of the 22nd Nordic Symposium of the
International Society for Applied Ethology**

**20-22 January 2010
Siilinjärvi, Finland**

SSES
**Finnish Society for
Applied Ethology**



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Finnish Society for Applied Ethology
and
University of Eastern Finland

Proceedings of the 22nd Nordic Symposium of the International Society
for Applied Ethology

Editor: Sari Hänninen

Published by: Finnish Society for Applied Ethology

Printed in: Kopijyvä, Kuopio, 2010

Farmer's attitudes affect piglet production parameters

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Production animal welfare is greatly influenced by the quality of stockmanship. Several studies have shown that farmers' attitudes towards animals affect their behavior which, in turn, affects animal behavior and welfare. We studied the relationship between farmers' attitudes towards the improvement of animal welfare and the actual productivity that partly reflects those attitudes. Understanding how farmers' attitudes and behaviour affect animals is crucial in improving animal welfare and thus also increasing animal productivity.

300 piglet and dairy farmers participated in our questionnaire study with the theory of planned behavior as a conceptual framework. Through a principal component analysis, we found that improving animal welfare was organized at two conceptual levels. At a concrete level, the farmers perceived it as treating the animals humanely, providing the animals with a favourable environment, enhancing the farmer's motivation and well-being at work, and taking care of the animals' health. At an abstract, general level attitudes appeared as two separate value dimensions: the majority of the respondents were profiled as so-called reward-seeking farmers, while the minority were represented as empathic farmers. In addition, there were several subjective norms that the farmers perceived as important for them.

We studied the relations between the pig farmers' attitudes (N = 124) and piglet production parameters using POTSI prolificacy data that makes the production parameters of different farms with different conditions and breeds comparable; the only item that remains is the effect of the farmer's proficiency and management. Correlations between the attitudes and the production figures showed that the farmers who emphasized the importance of the humane treatment weaned more piglets compared with a Finnish average (partial correlation, $\rho = 0,20^*$). Farmers who perceived it easy to provide the animals with a favourable environment also weaned more piglets ($\rho = 0,26^{**}$) and had a lower piglet mortality before weaning ($\rho = 0,22^*$). Perceiving slaughterhouses and agricultural advisers as important norms was associated with a higher piglet mortality ($\rho = 0,25^{**}$ and $\rho = 0,21^*$). The perceived importance of researchers correlated with lower piglet mortality ($\rho = 0,21^*$) and larger litters ($\rho = 0,26^{**}$).

Our results show that farmers' attitudes count: treating the animals humanely, investing in a favourable environment, and having a positive attitude towards new information and scientific research is associated with an above-average productivity on piglet farms. These attitudes, when implemented and concretized in practice, also benefit the animals through a higher standard of welfare.