



A good taste in the meat, a good taste in the mouth – Animal welfare as an aspect of pork quality in three European countries



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ABSTRACT

Welfare standards for farm animals in Europe are managed by two main strategies: a legislative and a market-driven strategy. The former imposes common minimum standards of animal welfare; it offers little or no help for consumers favoring welfare initiatives above the legal requirements. The latter can be used as a lever for improving welfare beyond baseline standards through initiatives supporting ‘welfare-friendly’ products that are sold at a premium. However, if this second strategy is to be successful the higher levels of welfare secured will need to reflect what consumers think is important. Using focus group interviews in three European countries, the study presented here looks at the way consumers perceive meat and meat consumption practices in relation to animal welfare. Regarding animal welfare as a quality attribute – something worth paying a premium for – the analysis shows that animal welfare is definitely a quality for which some consumers are prepared to pay as such, but that other consumers do not regard welfare as an important quality attribute. Another group of consumers consider welfare important and valuable given its positive link with attractive quality attributes such as taste. The results points to some striking national differences: little concern or action linked to animal welfare was expressed by English consumers; their Swedish counterparts displayed more concern and action; consumers in Denmark were similar to those in Sweden, but showed more variation in their attitudes and an awareness of barriers.

1. Introduction

The welfare of farm animals has been a topic of public discussion in many European countries for several decades. This public interest has been accompanied by scientific studies exploring the nature of public concerns over farm animal welfare, including a number of studies investigating public perceptions of pig production (e.g. Lassen et al., 2006; Krystallis et al., 2009). These studies show how public concern differs from that of welfare experts: along with tangible welfare issues concerning disease, pain and frustration, public concern focuses on less measurable issues like naturalness and animal integrity (Lassen et al., 2006).

Since the beginning of the modern farm animal welfare debate in the mid-1960s, various strategies have been pursued to meet public concerns by improving farm animal welfare. Two of the main strategies are: a legislative strategy where formal regulation imposes minimum standards of animal welfare, and a market-driven strategy, where consumer demand for meat from animals with higher levels of welfare is expected to drive standards up.

The legislative strategy appears in current EU legislation, where, for

example, Council Directive 2008/120/EC (EC, 2008) defines minimum standards for pig housing, and in the national regulations in the EU member countries implementing this directive. At a more general level, the EU also took an important step towards improving welfare when it formally recognized farm animals as ‘sentient beings’ in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 (EC, 2007). Thus EU regulation harmonizes production conditions across the member states and will ideally secure a minimum level of animal welfare. However, welfare minima may not mirror public concerns, as these may envisage higher levels of welfare and/or address ethical ideals of animal treatment other than those regulated. Moreover, EU regulation does not cover production outside the European Union where there may be huge differences in the production methods used, and in the welfare levels achieved in animal production. This challenge is amplified by increasing globalization: European producers of pork and other animal products now have to compete with producers who are not restricted by the kind of animal welfare regulation found within the EU.

Where the legislative strategy primarily focuses on ensuring a minimum of animal welfare, the market-driven strategy often rewards production with higher levels of animal welfare by securing these a

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price premium. The latter strategy can be seen in a variety of public and private labeling schemes, ranging from labels covering several welfare aspects, like the organic label, to more narrow labels, such as free range labels, and various other private labels which combine higher requirements for animal welfare with other quality attributes (Heerwagen et al., 2015). The strategy also includes retailer/wholesaler initiatives, e.g. by McDonald's and Sainsbury's, where a brand is supported by being linked to improved animal welfare through initiatives covering all products within the brand. A specific branch of an animal industry may also take initiatives to improve welfare but to be economically feasible such initiatives must either be driven by demand from retailers or wholesalers or pay off in terms of increased productivity.

The market-driven strategy therefore offers an opportunity for the food sector to move beyond baseline standards defined in legislation and leaves room for consumers to support production methods which, in one or more respects, offer additional welfare. Consumers currently tend to rely on extrinsic cues and credence characteristic, including interest in the way animal are raised, to form their expectations about meat products (Napolitano et al., 2010), making the market-driven strategy highly relevant. Thus, the market strategy may meet some of the challenges facing the legislative strategy and encourage production practices that involve higher levels of welfare, although the limit here will be set by the price premium consumers are willing to pay for those levels.

Henry Buller and Roe (2014) have shown how in some cases demands made by consumers have a substantial positive impact on animal welfare both locally and across borders, and how the use of welfare as a product quality attribute and brand differentiation can have the effect of pushing certain standards upwards (an example is the ever-wider dissemination of free-range eggs in many Western countries). They also stress, however, that such processes of marketization risk promoting certain 'consumer friendly' aspects of animal welfare – namely, those that are easily calculable and measurable as well as tangible and understandable from a consumer point of view. They point out that this may mean that other aspects of animal welfare, felt to be important by welfare scientists or by consumers, may be de-emphasized.

If the market-driven strategy is to be successful and improve animal welfare, the higher level of welfare promised by the welfare alternatives will, however, need to be in line with what consumers generally think is essential. Previous studies have found that although consumers are concerned about farm animal welfare, this concern is not generally a high priority in food choice which gives priority to a number of other attributes, such as taste, price and convenience. However, consumers may use animal welfare as an indicator of several other product attributes (Harper and Henson, 2001). And although the importance that citizens claim to attach to animal welfare seems to be relatively strong, consumers' interest in information about the welfare is only moderate compared to other food product attributes (Verbeke, 2009). It is thus not straightforward what consumers generally think is essential when it comes to animal welfare and welfare-friendly meat products.

Using pig production as a case, it is the aim of this article to deepen our understanding of the consumer's role in animal welfare management, and in this way to improve future market-based welfare initiatives. To this end, we investigate consumer perceptions of animal welfare as a quality attribute, and ask how consumers perceive their own practices of consuming meat.

In reviews of empirical studies on public perceptions of animal welfare, animal welfare is often viewed as a quality attribute among many others. These studies operationalize animal welfare as a quality alongside taste and other qualities directly perceived by the consumer (Ngapo et al., 2003; Krystallis et al., 2009; Tawse, 2010; Cerjak et al., 2011). Other studies conceive of animal welfare with a broader understanding of quality and include quality parameters such as safety and product origin (Vanhonacker et al., 2010); healthiness and absence

of harmful substances (Verbeke and Viaene 2000); environmental issues (Izmirlir and Phillips, 2011); and none or limited use of genetic engineering and pesticides (Carlsson et al., 2005).

In this paper we adopt an exploratory approach to see which quality aspects are perceived to be relevant by the study participants. Thus quality is understood as a tangible as well as credence product characteristic that is used by the participants to evaluate food products. Tangible attributes include organoleptic characteristics such as texture, fat content, color and taste. These attributes relate to the physical features of the meat; they are also called experience qualities, as "the user has to consume the product to experience the quality" (Becker, 2000, p. 191). Credence attributes, on the other hand, are not perceivable in the same way. They include, among other things, environmental features and animal welfare. These are not directly represented in the product itself. Instead they are aspects of the production process, and they denote features that may be important for the consumer although they are not experienced in consumption (Becker, 2000; Korzen and Lassen 2010).

Brunso and colleagues (2005) propose to distinguish between four types of food quality: *the product-oriented quality* such as fat percentage or muscle size of meat; *the process-oriented quality* that covers the aspects related to how the product has been produced; *the quality control*, defined as the standards a product has to meet in order to be approved for a special classification; and finally *the user-oriented quality* which is a subjective quality perception from a user point of view. They propose, following Grunert et al. (1996), to analyze the overall food product quality perception process using the Total Food Quality Model that includes all four types and seeks to explain how people make their judgment on expected and perceived quality (see Grunert et al., 1996; Brunso et al. 2005 for more details).

In the present paper, the interest is not in the broader process of quality perceptions. Instead our focus is on the consumers and a user-oriented quality perception and we supplement this view with an interest in context: Cardello (1995) stresses in his definition of food quality that food quality is a "perceptual/evaluative construct that is relative to person, place and time and that is subject to the same influences of context and expectations as are other perceptual/evaluative phenomena" (p. 163). The contextuality of quality – raising questions about what is perceived to be of good quality and why – has also been observed by others (Lassen et al., 2006; Korzen and Lassen, 2010; Korzen et al., 2011). It makes quality a dynamic concept that varies across time and space. Thus quality, from the consumer's point of view, may change as one gets older, has children, and so forth, just as it may vary between cultures and sub-groups.

Previous research has shown that interview participants reveal different perceptions of meat quality depending on the context they are placed within (Korzen and Lassen, 2010). In an everyday context, where people act as consumers, quality is mainly determined with reference to tangible (material) features. But when meat is discussed in a production context people express themselves as citizens, and focus mostly on quality as a credence attribute.

We also know from previous research that changes in societal structures, with an ever-growing distance between ordinary people and animal production, have resulted in "de-animalization" (Vialles 1994) which sees the difference between the living animal and end product (the meat we consume) widening. In the everyday context it is to be expected, then, that inherent material qualities of the meat itself will be in focus, not the living animal. It is all about the meat qualities and expected quality attributes associated with a social and common meal, and hence a person in this context will speak mainly from a consumer point of view. In the context of production, on the other hand, the animal is more prominent and meat dominates less: here the immaterial qualities are at stake. When the issues framed in this context, the informant will speak mainly from a citizen's point of view (Lassen et al., 2006; Korzen and Lassen, 2010).

There are also marked differences in the way public discussions

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