



Attitudes of Canadian citizens toward farm animal welfare: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger project to determine if there are animal-welfare-related values shared by some commercial food–animal producers and non-producers in Canada, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit opinions about animal welfare among 24 urban and rural residents not involved in commercial animal production. All participants possessed a self-described interest in food animal well-being and were therefore assumed to represent the views of Canadian non-producers most apt to engage in efforts to shape the animal welfare policies of governments and businesses. Participants described animal welfare in moral or ethical terms, expressed virtually unanimous support for animals having access to “natural” living conditions, and (somewhat less often) linked animal welfare to positive affective states. Maintaining reasonable health and biological functioning was seen as important but was not to take precedence over the benefits of natural living. Participants favoured small family farms and unanimously objected to confinement housing. Participants did, however, offer qualified support for intensive practices and were unanimous in not assigning blame to producers, whom they regarded sympathetically. Predictably perhaps, given our sample, most were critical of industries preoccupied with profits and of consumers who unthinkingly seek cheap food. Recommended ways of improving welfare included instilling in consumers a greater appreciation for the intrinsic value of humanely reared animals, and better education of children regarding the connection between animals and food. Disagreements arose over the welfare implications of organic production and approaches to animal advocacy. Differing demographic backgrounds, experiential involvement with food animals and knowledge of food animal production practices may have influenced the nature or specificity of welfare concerns. Many participants admitted a lack of knowledge about contemporary production practices and some expressed an interest in obtaining additional knowledge. These findings contribute to a broader effort to identify shared values among different stakeholder groups as a basis for formulating widely acceptable, farm animal care and handling policies.

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1. Introduction

Farm animal welfare has often been an area of conflict between producers and non-producers. In the USA, citizen petitions have given rise to legislative initiatives – including California's high-profile, multi-million-dollar media

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battle over “Proposition 2” in 2008 – which have resulted in the prohibition of certain confinement housing systems in numerous states (Centner, 2010). In Europe, surveys revealing citizen concern over intensive agriculture and pressure for higher farm animal welfare standards (European Commission, 2005, 2007; Kjærnes and Lavik, 2008) have led to widespread regulations. As noted by Driessen (2012) “adversarial and entrenched oppositions” have tended to dominate public discussion of farm animal welfare.

Perhaps, however, conflict is not the only option. According to Friedman and Himmelstein (2006), p. 524, research on conflict resolution has shown that “deeper understanding by the parties of their own and each other’s perspectives, priorities, and concerns enables them to work through their conflict together.” Moreover, as noted by Picard and Melchin (2007), p. 40, “developing insight about our values and interests can change how we experience conflict, which can shift the conflict situation from impasse to an attitude of openness to the concerns of the other party and to the possibility of resolution.”

In this context, research intended to identify beliefs and concerns related to animal welfare, as held by both producers and non-producers, has been undertaken in Europe, principally in connection with the Welfare Quality Project (Blokhuis et al., 2010). In contrast, public understanding of farm animal welfare has received considerably less attention in other geographic areas. With relatively few European studies available at the outset of our project, and given the considerable geographic and cultural differences between Canada and Europe, we undertook a multi-study project intended to elicit some citizen views regarding good or satisfactory lives for food animals. Specifically, our intent was (i) to discern whether there are animal-welfare-related values shared by some commercial food–animal producers and non-producers in Canada, and (ii) if so, how those shared values might form or contribute to policies that could be supported by both groups. More broadly, our purpose has been to facilitate discussion, identify shared values regarding animal welfare, engender self-awareness among stakeholders, and facilitate consensus-building on farm animal care and handling practices. It is hoped that shared values, reflecting the broadest consensus possible (e.g., Tuytens et al., 2010), may be identified and used to contribute to policies that could be widely supported. In this study, research was conducted to ascertain the views of some Canadian non-producers interested in farm animal well-being.

2. Methods

Interviews were conducted with 24 members of the Canadian public residing in British Columbia (12), Alberta (2), Manitoba (1), Ontario (6), Quebec (1) and Nova Scotia (2). Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy which sought: (i) adults with an *a priori* interest in farm animal welfare, and (ii) a rural-urban residency ratio consistent with Canadian demographics (Statistics Canada, 2006). Those with an existing interest were expected (i) to be willing and able to discuss farm animal welfare over the course of an anticipated 90-min interview, (ii) to be potentially/relatively informed about

modern production practices, and (iii) to represent citizens most inclined to advocate for animal welfare to governments and businesses. Previous research has shown that women are more concerned about the treatment of animals (Ellis et al., 2009; Herzog, 2007; Herzog et al., 1991; Pifer et al., 1994; Taylor and Signal, 2005), and that women comprise the majority of those engaged in animal rights movements (Herzog, 1993). Hence, it was expected (and accepted) that we would elicit a disproportionate number of female participants.

According to Kendall et al. (2006), p. 418, who found that “talking with farmers” was significantly related to attitudes about farm animal care, efforts were also made to stratify the sample on the basis of urban and rural residency (i.e., to interview some citizens living in rural areas who were presumed to have more exposure to farm animals and animal producers). This was also consistent with Vanhonacker et al. (2008) and Prickett et al. (2010). To this end, and among other recruitment methods, advertisements were posted in rural libraries and various regional publications. In addition, participants were recruited directly by the researchers, members of the UBC Faculty of Land and Food Systems, through advertisements on the UBC Animal Welfare Program web site, and with the assistance of some participants themselves. Participants were deliberately sought with an *a priori* interest in farm animal welfare and not those opposed to all use of animals by people. Ultimately, only one such person applied to participate but withdrew voluntarily before being interviewed.

2.1. Participant information

The 24 participants included 21 females and 3 males. Fifteen (62.5%) described themselves as from urban environments and nine (37.5%) from rural. Participants had had different degrees of exposure or experience with farming. Five had been raised on hobby or commercial farms, five had family connections to a farm which they visited, four had worked on farms as students, volunteers or employees, six had visited friends’ farms with some frequency, and four had rarely visited farms. Two of the 24 were currently hobby farmers. Participants also had varying degrees of involvement with animal protection organizations. One was employed by an animal protection organization, 17 had volunteered with or supported such an organization in some way and the remaining 6 had not. Six participants described themselves as “practicing vegetarians” (i.e., no consumption of food animal flesh). Among the remainder, five described their diets as being somewhat meat-restricted (usually no red meat) for philosophical reasons while two reported limiting their red meat intake owing to concern over cholesterol levels. Compared to typical demographics, our sample was over-represented by supporters of animal protection organizations and by those with familial or other forms of experience with farm animals/operations.

2.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 90 min, were conducted face-to-face (22) or by

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