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Citizens' views on the practices of zero-grazing and cow-calf separation in the dairy industry: Does providing information increase acceptability?

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study was to assess the influence of provision of information on lay citizens' opinions regarding 2 common management practices, zero-grazing and cow-calf separation. To aid in the interpretation of the findings, our secondary aim was to explore the awareness and opinions of Brazilian citizens about these practices. We surveyed a convenience sample of Brazilian citizens (192 men and 208 women), recruited in a public place, with the majority stating that they were largely unfamiliar with animal production and lived in urban environments. Participants were presented short scenarios with information on the primary production factors and welfare concerns for and against zero-grazing ($n = 200$) or cow-calf separation ($n = 200$). Participants were then asked to state their position (reject, indifferent, or support), and to provide the reason(s) justifying their position. Immediately following, participants were provided a short statement describing either zero-grazing or cow-calf separation, depending on what question they responded to in the first part. Two closed questions (Q) followed each of these statements: (Q1) "Are you aware of this practice?" with choices yes, somewhat, or no, and (Q2) "What is your position regarding this practice?" with choices reject, indifferent, or support. Only 31 and 33% of the respondents were aware of zero-grazing and cow-calf separation, respectively. Previous awareness of existence of practice did not influence levels of support. Provision of information resulted in more people rejecting the practices of zero-grazing and cow-calf separation. Participants' main justifications to reject zero-grazing and cow-calf separation focused on perceived negative effects of practices on farm animal welfare and product quality, and loss of naturalness. Survey participants, Brazilians living in urban environments, with little or no association with dairy production, were generally

unaware that many cows do not have access to pasture and that cows are separated from their calf at birth. Independent of provision of additional information, most participants did not support these practices. Provision of brief explanatory information played a minor role in influencing people's views, but failed to result in general acceptance.

Key words: animal welfare, public attitude, public perception, survey

INTRODUCTION

The lay public, in contrast to agriculture industry specialists and farmers, frequently rate farm animal husbandry practices as detrimental to animal welfare (Vanhonacker et al., 2008; Benard and de Cock Buning, 2013; Ventura et al., 2013). Negative attitudes expressed by the public toward animal production have been argued by some to be a consequence of ignorance of the realities of animal production (Capper, 2011; You et al., 2014; Pieper et al., 2016). Many working within farm animal production thus argue that educating the public should result in greater acceptance of current management practices (discussed by Ventura et al., 2016). This apparent disconnect between how members of society that are not routinely involved with animal production and those that are actively involved view animal agriculture may be a consequence of different viewpoints. Reasons in support of, or opposed to, a particular farming practice may be science-based, practical, economic, or ethical in nature (see review by Weary et al., 2016). In many cases, even in the absence of evidence to support these claims, lay citizens frequently prefer systems they perceive as natural (see review by Clark et al., 2016).

That the public question some farm animal management practices is not surprising. For example, inflicting pain on animals is considered by many to be abhorrent (Weary et al., 2006). However, despite ample science-based evidence indicating that dehorning is painful and the availability of well-established pain-mitigation protocols (Stafford and Mellor, 2011), many producers still

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routinely dehorn without pain management [United States: Fulwider et al. (2008); Canada: Vasseur et al. (2010) and Winder et al. (2016); Brazil: Hötzel et al. (2014); Europe: Cozzi et al. (2015)].

Two additional dairy production practices that are common on many dairy farms but are also viewed as being contentious are early cow-calf separation (Ventura et al., 2013) and housing dairy cattle in zero-grazing systems (Schuppli et al., 2014). Reasons provided by proponents of early separation include perceived assurances that the calf is properly nourished and cared for, improved calf health, reduced stress for the dam (and the calf) associated with early separation, and increased practicality given the challenges associated with keeping cows and calves together (Mee, 2008; Ventura et al., 2013). In contrast, those that argue against early separation cite lack of naturalness, emotional pain, and poor health for both the dam and the offspring (Ventura et al., 2013). Many working in the dairy industry justify zero-grazing systems on the basis that the nutrient intake of the cow can be controlled through the provision of formulated diets, that grazing results in lower milk production, and results in putative economic and environmental advantages (Schuppli et al., 2014). Those in favor of grazing cite naturalness, the ability of the cow to breathe fresh air, freedom of movement, and improved cow health status (Schuppli et al., 2014).

A growing body of evidence indicates public opposition to early separation of the cow and calf, as well as lack of pasture access for dairy cattle (Boogaard et al., 2011; Ventura et al., 2013; Schuppli et al., 2014; Cardoso et al., 2016). One very recent study (Ventura et al., 2016), involving face-to-face interviews with 50 members of the Canadian public that had little or no experience with dairy farming, highlighted zero-grazing and cow-calf separation as particularly contentious for the participants. In fact, attitudes regarding the welfare of cattle on dairy farms, which were initially primarily positive, declined after the participants visited a dairy farm. The fact that the majority of participants were unaware of the practice of early separation and that most lactating cows were not provided access to pasture resulted in a large number of the participants losing confidence that dairy cows have a good life.

Cow-calf separation at birth is a common management practice used on Brazilian dairy farms (Hötzel et al., 2014; dos Santos and Bittar, 2016). Despite most Brazilian cows having some access to pasture year-round (Costa et al., 2013), an increasing number of dairy cows are being housed in zero-grazing systems, likely in response to increases in milk demand and policies that favor intensification (von Keyserlingk and Hötzel, 2015; Balção et al., 2017). Despite Brazil's growing position in the production of animal products (e.g., milk, animal

protein), little is known about the views from citizens of the country regarding animal production (von Keyserlingk and Hötzel, 2015).

The primary aim of our study was to assess the influence of provision of information on lay citizens' opinions regarding 2 common management practices: zero-grazing and cow-calf separation. To aid in the interpretation of the findings, our secondary aim was to explore the awareness and opinions of Brazilian citizens about these practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Research with Human Beings of Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. Lay citizens were recruited at the International Airport Hercílio Luz, in Florianópolis, during the months of January and February 2016. The location was chosen due to the intense movement of people and waiting times, which provided the opportunity to identify respondents of both sexes, based on our intent that there be a 50:50 sex balance. Individuals were asked to voluntarily participate in the survey if they met certain conditions: be at least 18 years old, a Brazilian citizen, and interested in answering a short questionnaire in Portuguese covering the general theme animal production. The material presented describing cow-calf separation and zero-grazing practices was adapted from Ventura et al., (2013) and Schuppli et al., (2014), respectively. Upon verbal agreement to participate, the participant was asked to sign a consent form and given a 3-page printed questionnaire to fill out. The researcher remained visible to answer questions, but did not provide any information on either of the topics while the participant filled out the questionnaire.

All consenting participants began the survey by answering 8 closed demographic questions, including sex, age, schooling, region of origin (urban/rural), and self-assigned knowledge of dairy production in Brazil. Participants were then randomized into 2 treatment groups. Group A participants were provided an information capsule describing cow-calf separation, adapted from that described by Ventura et al. (2013). Two main changes were made to the original text; first, we positioned the argument regarding the amount of milk consumed as the first argument rather than the latter argument, as was the case in the Ventura et al. (2013) study. This was done given that all of our participants were, by design, not familiar with the dairy industry, which was in contrast to Ventura et al. (2013), which had a more heterogeneous participant pool. Second, given that much of the Brazilian dairy industry still uses pasture, we modified the wording of one sentence in the original text, from "On many dairy farms cows

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