

Assessing the human–animal relationship in farmed species: A critical review

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on six main issues. First, we briefly explain why an increased understanding of the human–animal relationship (HAR) is an essential component of any strategy intended to improve the welfare of farmed animals and their stockpersons. Second, we list the main internal and external factors that can influence the nature of the relationship and the interactions between human beings and farm animals. Third, we argue that the numerous tests that have been used to assess the HAR fall into three main categories (stationary human, moving human, handling/restraint), according to the degree of human involvement. Fourth, the requirements that any test of HAR must fulfil before it can be considered effective, and the ways in which the tests can be validated are discussed. Fifth, the various types of test procedures that have been used to assess the HAR in a

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range of farmed species are reviewed and critically discussed. Finally, some research perspectives that merit further attention are shown.

The present review embraces a range of farmed animals. Our primary reasons for including a particular species were: whether or not general interest has been expressed in its welfare and its relationship with humans, whether relevant literature was available, and whether it is farmed in at least some European countries. Therefore, we include large and small ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats), pigs, poultry (chickens), fur animals (foxes, mink) and horses. Although horses are primarily used for sport, leisure or therapy they are farmed as draught, food or breeding animals in many countries. Literature on the HAR in other species was relatively scarce so they receive no further mention here.

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1. The impact of the human–animal relationship (HAR) on welfare and productivity

Domestication is a “process by which a population of animals becomes adapted to man and to the captive environment by genetic changes occurring over generations and environmentally induced developmental events recurring during each generation” (Price, 1984). Despite countless generations of selective breeding the potentially most frightening events that many farm animals are likely to experience are exposure to human beings and to sudden changes in their social or physical environments (Boissy, 1995; Jones, 1996; Hemsworth and Coleman, 1998). More specifically, unless they have become accustomed to human contact, of either a neutral or positive nature, the predominant reaction of most farm animals to people is still one of fear (Duncan, 1990; Jones, 1997). Not unexpectedly, exposure to rough, aversive and/or unpredictable handling can exacerbate the problem. Furthermore, it has been proposed that animals often perceive contact with a human being as a predatory encounter (Suarez and Gallup, 1982; Jones, 1997; Boissy, 1998). Indeed, many of the occasions on which animals and humans interact in current farm practice are negatively reinforcing, e.g., veterinary treatment, restraint, depopulation, etc., while, other than feeding, few are positively reinforcing. It has also been suggested that contact with humans could become even more distressing if the increasing use of labour-saving technologies, e.g., automation, result in reduced opportunities for the animals to become habituated to people (Duncan, 1990; Rushen et al., 1999a). One of the primary reasons for differences in the HAR found between farms is variation in the number, duration and nature of daily interactions between stockpeople and the animals (Hemsworth and Coleman, 1998). The stockpersons’ behaviour is a major variable determining animals’ fear of or confidence in human beings and, hence, the quality of the HAR. The nature/quality of human–animal interactions can range from frequent, calm and ‘friendly’ to infrequent and predominantly negative ones (Hemsworth and Coleman, 1998; Waiblinger et al., 2002).

Negative handling and fear of humans have a number of undesirable consequences for the livestock, farmers and consumers. For instance, the sudden, intense or prolonged elicitation of fear can seriously damage the welfare, productivity, product quality and

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