



Building ‘cowshed cultures’: A cultural perspective on the promotion of stockmanship and animal welfare on dairy farms

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A B S T R A C T

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Improving animal welfare is an important part of the development of the agricultural industry, particularly at a time when intensification and the encroachment of factory-style production systems is making the maintenance of human-animal relations increasingly difficult. Animal science deals with the issue of improving stockmanship by focusing on the relationships between attitudes and behaviour, under the premise that improved attitudes will lead to improved behaviour. From an analysis of 42 interviews with owners, sharemilkers and workers on dairy farms in New Zealand we present a different view, seeing behaviour instead as part of a self-reinforcing culture in which animals, humans and the physical structure all contribute to the development of farm specific ways of doing and being. We further suggest that changing one stockperson's attitude alone is insufficient to ensure a change in the culture as other actors – including animals and non-human actors – reinforce any existing culture that has developed, making both attitudinal and behavioural change difficult. We conclude by discussing the key importance of designing farm systems and structures that promote positive interactions between animals and humans and suggest that this, rather than simply promoting knowledge and attitudinal change, is likely to be the most effective way of maintaining stockmanship in the face of an industrialising agriculture.

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1. Introduction

Evidence from across the world indicates a growing public concern for the welfare of farm animals both in developed (Appleby, 2004; Lassen et al., 2006; Hall and Sandilands, 2007) and developing economies (e.g. China – Shuxian et al., 2005). Within Europe, animal welfare has become a central feature of the new multifunctional model for agriculture (Mann, 2005) while, at the same time, industry players are increasingly recognising that many consumers incorporate welfare conditions into their purchasing decisions (Clarke et al., 2007). Consequently governments, industry and retailers alike are looking to improve welfare measures through either legislation and public policy (Lassen et al., 2006), or, in the case of retailers, incorporating welfare standards within contractual obligations for suppliers (Marsden, 1998; Serpell, 2004).

This has led to widespread debate on the issue of how best to view and assess animal welfare. Whether to focus on biological functioning, natural functioning or feeling-based definitions of welfare (Fraser, 2003; Dwyer, 2009), the validity of the “five freedoms” (freedom from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury and disease; the ability to express normal behaviour; and freedom from fear and distress – Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1992) (Buller and Morris, 2003), and whether to base policies on input-based measures or animal-based measures (Keeling, 2009) are among a range of critical issues currently being discussed within public, scientific, industry and policy circles.¹

While the focus has clearly been on indicators and measurement, one issue that has received less attention is the relationship between stockpeople and their animals, and the implications this has for the wellbeing of stock. In particular, it has been suggested that the industrialisation of farming systems and establishment of

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¹ Note that the body of research defining and discussing these concepts is extensive. Thus, rather than repeating this discussion, we refer readers to existing literature.

factory-style management techniques is breaking down the traditional relationship between farmers and their livestock and treating animals as commodities in a production chain rather than as sentient beings (Fraser, 2003; Lassen et al., 2006; Lusk and Norwood, 2010). As a result, the question of how to maintain our millennia old relationship in the face of structural changes to the industry is of increasing importance to the animal welfare debate.

Europe, for example, has witnessed the development of ever larger and more mechanised farms, rationalised labour systems, and “confined and barren” housing systems inhabited by animals bred to maximise production (Bracke et al., 2005: 32). Consequently, the relationship between stockpeople and animals has changed (Larrère and Larrère, 2000; Boivin et al., 2003). For example, the development of large confined systems with a high ratio of animals to people has increased the difficulties in providing human care to farm animals (Vaarst and Alrøe, 2011). Similarly, changes to the production chain have led to animals having shorter more transient lives which, consequently, limits the ability of farmers to form relationships or develop empathy (Te Velde et al., 2002; Wilkie, 2005).

Within these new ‘industrialised systems’ stockmanship² thus becomes increasingly difficult but, at the same time, increasingly important. Besides the critical role stockpeople play in detecting illness, lameness or parasites within a herd (e.g. Morgan-Davies et al., 2006; Dwyer, 2009) studies have illustrated clearly that the quality of care provided by stockpeople can be critical to levels of stress experienced by farm animals (e.g. Lensink, 2002; Boivin et al., 2003; Rennie et al., 2003; Bertenshaw and Rowlinson, 2008; Hemsworth et al., 2009), identifying stockmanship as a key issue for the promotion of good animal welfare.

However, research into stockmanship (and farm-animal/human interactions in general) has been patchy. Researchers such as Boivin et al. (2003) have observed that while the issue has strongly motivated biologists and psychologists, it has received less attention from sociologists and philosophers – despite the sociological and philosophical issues that arise in the debate. In part, this absence of a coherent body of research may be attributable to an epistemological conflict between the social and natural sciences. Kristensen et al. (2008: 5), investigating herd health management, note that “qualitative approaches are received with scepticism by the natural scientific community because of an accused subjective nature and the absence of ‘facts’”.

Yet a lack of interest amongst the social sciences is also noted in the sociological literature. For example, Bryant (1979: 399) describes sociologists as “singularly derelict in their failure to address the zoological component in human interaction and attendant social systems” a dereliction still not addressed 23 years later when Arluke (2002: 369) asks “why is there a lack of interest within sociology to animal studies?” Buller (2009: 127) goes so far as to suggest that humanist social scientists have ignored farm animals in general “rendering them largely invisible and their agency unaccounted for in the analysis of human society.”

Some recent sociological/geographical studies have focused more specifically on farm animals. For example, Wilkie (2005) used the concept of emotional ‘attachment’ and ‘detachment’ to investigate changes in the welfare social contract between animals and stockpeople in the context of agricultural intensification. Riley (2011) investigated how dairy farmers emotionally detach themselves from their animals at the point of retirement. Holloway (2001) illustrated the ethical complexity of the relationship between people and their livestock by

focusing on hobby-farms, where there was conflict between the animal’s role as a pet and its consumption, and, in a later paper, Holloway (2007) explored how farming technologies (milking facilities) mediate the relationship between humans and animals. Yarwood and Evans (2006) employed the sociological concept of ‘habitus’ (effectively, socialised and embodied predispositions – Bourdieu, 1998) to explore the cultural value of Welsh livestock and its connectedness with farming communities. Finally, Gray’s (1998) work exploring constancy between sheep, the farm, and the farm family offers further insights into how the identity of the farmer becomes intertwined with that of his/her animals.

Although this research is promising, social scientists have still, in general, failed to engage with Boivin et al.’s (2003) main concern – sociological issues surrounding the question of stockmanship and animal welfare. The result of this lack of interest by the social sciences and the corresponding ‘strong motivation’ of biologists and psychologists to study these issues is that, by default, the body of literature on this aspect of the human–animal relationship has only a limited sociological or cultural perspective. On the other hand, numerous studies have employed quantitative attitudinal approaches such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) or the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) to explore the behaviour of stockpeople towards animals (e.g. Coleman et al., 1998, 2003; Hemsworth et al., 2000; Boivin et al., 2007; Jansen et al., 2009; Kauppinen et al., 2010) and, as a result, approaches to improving standards of care by stockpeople focus strongly on the need to change attitudes.

This has created somewhat of a schism in the literature on stockmanship and welfare. Research tends to be either qualitative and contextual (in the case of the social sciences) or quantitative and psychometric – generally perceiving stockmanship as a discrete cognitive activity rather than a cultural process (in the case of animal welfare science). While social research focuses on the nature of the relationship between stockpeople and animals in terms of its construction and how farmers emotionally attach and detach themselves from their animals, animal welfare researchers deal with the more practical issue of how to improve the relationship between stockpeople and animals through inducing attitudinal and behavioural change. We contend that it is important that these two strands are joined.

In particular, the focus on quantitative research and cognitive (attitudinal) solutions means that much of the current understanding of how to improve welfare through behavioural change suffers from problems common to quantitative research. This includes: a neglect of the social and cultural construction of the variables studied (Silverman, 1998), a focus on attitudes without considering how attitudes develop (Kirk and Miller, 1986), and a tendency to “provide ‘idealised’ accounts of attitudes and behaviour which, because they are rationalisations have an uncertain relation to actual situations” (Silverman, 1985: 15).

To address the above issues we adopt Segerdahl’s (2007) perspective of viewing individual farms as a culture and develop this idea further to examine the interaction between the material culture, human (stockperson) culture and animal ‘culture’ on dairy farms. This builds on and critiques the existing attitudinal theory (Hemsworth and Coleman, 1998) and presents a more contextual view – conceiving of the behaviour of stockpeople not as solely based on cognition/knowledge, but developing through being part of a wider farm culture. Through the analysis we outline the key components of the culture (such as communication, the development of empathy, the role of the cow ‘culture’, and so on) and discuss the implications for the development of intensive farming systems, i.e. how to maintain a positive cowshed culture in a rapidly intensifying industry.

² While the generic term for the process of caring for farm animals, this term also refers also to the actions of many female stockpeople.

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