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A SIMPLE VALUE-DISTINCTION APPROACH AIDS TRANSPARENCY IN FARM ANIMAL WELFARE DEBATE

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ABSTRACT. Public debate on acceptable farm animal husbandry suffers from a confusion of tongues. To clarify positions of various stakeholder groups in their joint search for acceptable solutions, the concept of animal welfare was split up into three notions: no suffering, respect for intrinsic value, and non-appalling appearance of animals. This strategy was based on the hypothesis that multi-stakeholder solutions should be based on shared values rather than on compromises. The usefulness of such an artificial value distinction strategy was tested in a small series of experiments. The results demonstrate that the chosen concept to distinguish between values is effective in a stakeholder context. Farmers' views on doing good to animals appeared to be largely based on their value to prevent suffering and predominantly focused on the provision of regular care. Their priority for this value is clearly shared with other stakeholders, providing a basis for joint solutions. The concept of intrinsic value does not play a discernable role in farmers' considerations. Based on the varying views on welfare, it can be inferred that there is a gradual rather than a principal difference between government legislation and farmers' values, whereas public perception and acceptance of farm practices remains complicated. Distinction between value groups and focusing on a selected notion (such as no suffering) proved to be effective in bringing representatives of stakeholder groups together, but is unlikely to bridge the emotional gap between commercial farm practices and public ideals.

KEY WORDS: Animal welfare, farmer ethics, interactive design, intrinsic value, stakeholder views

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Animal welfare is a key issue in society's unease about practices in intensive animal production. Various efforts have been made to design acceptable production systems in cooperation with science and stakeholders. However, in such multi-actor environments, the risk of confusion of tongues is considerable.

A small series of actor-involved studies was performed to determine whether such misunderstandings could be reduced by explicitly addressing the values underpinning the perceptions of animal welfare. The assumption

was made that minimizing the suffering of farm animals is a widely shared value and that addressing this shared value would provide an opportunity for calming the societal unease. A further assumption pinpoints two other important values: the notion of respecting the intrinsic value of animals and the notion of non-appalling appearance. These three values form a hierarchical three-notion concept. This paper describes an empirical experimental approach of these notions of animal welfare values. To begin with a visualization of the different views is presented through caricatures of the welfare views of the key actors. Then a test is described of the first notion (minimization of suffering) in a multi-stakeholder environment followed by details of an exploration of the second notion (intrinsic value) among farmers' groups. In the summing up are comments on the applicability of the key values in multi-stakeholder processes. The third notion – attractive appearance – will not be worked out in this paper.

2. CARICATURE OF THE CONFUSION OF TONGUES ON ANIMAL WELFARE

Arguments around the public debate on farm animal welfare vary widely. Public ideals were characterized by Beekman et al. (2003) by the words “straw, space and outdoor access.” Based on the studies described below, farmers' views on good animal welfare can be described as the animals receiving good care. Animal welfare scientists generally focus on biological normal functioning. Animal protection organizations strive towards combining a good life for the individual animal with the policy that animals should be kept in an environment that is as natural as possible (Verhoog, 2000). The caricaturing may be summed up as follows:

- Farmers focus on regular care based on habit and good *intentions*
- Scientists focus on *biological parameters*
- The public focuses on *icons* like space, straw, and outdoor access
- Animal protection organizations combine animal nature and maximal care

These caricatures are predominantly based on Beekman et al. (2003); Bracke et al. (2004); results of the studies discussed below (De Greef et al., 2004; Stafleu et al., 2004), and information from the EU-wide integrated project Welfare Quality (Welfare Quality, 2004).

3. A SIMPLE HIERARCHICAL THREE-NOTION CONCEPT OF ANIMAL WELFARE

3.1. *Three-Notion Concept: No suffering, Intrinsic value, and Non-Appalling Appearance*

Despite the principally different positions, stakeholder groups seem to commonly strive towards a good life for farm animals. The shared value among stakeholders of doing good to animals can be summed up as: “animals should not suffer.” Other values that play a role in dealing with animals can be divided up into two more key notions: respecting the intrinsic value of animals; and meeting the needs of the (human) observers (it should look nicely). See Figure 1.

These notions are not fully orthogonal but are complementary so their hierarchical order should be taken into account. Once the requirements covering the first notion have been met, the other aspects remain. The second notion (respect for intrinsic value) simply follows-on from the first notion, such as the plea for some degree of naturalness is additional to the inherent needs of the animals. The reasoning behind this is that animals themselves long for satisfaction of their biological needs rather than strive for naturalness. The plea for naturalness is of human origin, based on our view that animals are creatures that belong in a specific (natural) context. The third notion embellishes the first two notions. A non-appalling or pleasant appearance may be independent of what is good for the quality of life for the animal itself and what is thought “normal” for animals. We like to see animals grazing in the pasture, but this does not mean that animals kept indoors are suffering.



Figure 1. Deduction of motives around dealing with farm animals from the perspective of “doing good to animals.”

4. NO SUFFERING AS A SHARED VALUE TESTED IN A DESIGN STUDY

The no suffering notion was tested in a multi-stakeholder project created in response to society's unease about practices in intensive animal production. A research program was initiated to work on systems innovations in an interactive (stakeholder involved) and interdisciplinary way (see Grin et al., 2004). An interdisciplinary group was formed to formulate requirements for future pig production systems that meet societal demands, singly with regard to animal "welfare" (De Greef et al., 2003). The term "animal welfare" was avoided as being too broad and ambiguous. In addition, the literature provides a highly divergent array of definitions and approaches of the concept of animal welfare ranging from highly subjective to as objective as possible, and from biological to philosophical, see for example Broom (1999), Wemelsfelder (1999), and De Tavernier (2001). We chose a simple, chiefly ethologically based approach. Taking center place is the view of most stakeholder groups that the quality of life as perceived by the animal is the main aspect of doing good to farm animals. The working hypothesis was that animals would experience life as good if kept in a way that satisfies all their behavioral and physiological needs. This approach was adopted from Bracke (2001, and Anonymous, 2001), based on the assumption that meeting the needs of the animals produces satisfied animals. Put into the three-notion perspective as presented above: the group chose the "no suffering" argument as their sole design target.

The implications of the animals' needs were analyzed, especially from a biological/behavior-physiological point of view. Requirements were then formulated for the living environment for pigs with accompanying management. Analysis and design focused on the quality of life for the animals, and deliberately ignored other socially relevant notions of dealing with animals. Participating stakeholders were well aware of this. As could be expected, other dimensions expressed in terms such as naturalness, intrinsic value, respect, species-specific husbandry environments, and public image came up repeatedly. Scientists and stakeholders alike withstood the temptation to include consequences of these notions in the system's design. The resulting product was a brochure and public statement from the groups involved to the effect that "a good life for pigs is practicable."

The most important impact of the study affected the range of thought and follow-up initiatives adopted by major stakeholders and headed by a new consortium of the largest animal protection organization and the largest farmers organization in the Netherlands. Despite their separate strategies, the parties unanimously agreed that reduction of suffering was the primary problem in pig production needing solving, and were willing to

participate in joint initiatives in the endeavor to accomplish this. This demonstrated that the no-suffering notion indeed embraces a shared value and it caused stakeholders to make public this value joint priority, paving the way towards progress in the quest for socially acceptable farming practices.

4.1. *From Support for the No-Suffering Argument Towards Exploration of the Next Argument*

A major stakeholder group involved in the design process, an animal protection NGO, pointed out a major risk of this approach: a further increase of an instrumental view on animals, neglecting the specific value of them as living creatures (“instrumentalization”). They argued that, in an extreme approach, a consequence of the no-suffering approach could even lead to a plea for the removal of animals’ feelings to make their lives “good.” It was inferred that the functioning of this value was at stake especially among breeders and farmers. Putting this concern into the perspective of the presented concept, it implied a plea for not omitting the second notion. This NGO’s concern overlapped the government’s desire to explore farmers’ views of their obligations towards their animals. It resulted in an exploratory study among farmers, putting the intrinsic value notion of the concept central.

5. INTRINSIC VALUE OF ANIMALS FROM A FARMER’S POINT OF VIEW

To explore the degree to which farmers attribute an intrinsic value to their animals, three focus group sessions were organized. The study was designed to identify what the intrinsic value notion meant to the farmers, and how it related to farmers’ views on animal welfare.

5.1. *Group Selection*

Three national farmers organizations were each asked to form a group of 6–10 pig farmers to discuss their attitudes towards their animals. As the discussions dealt with more than routine farming practices, it was suggested that the farmers’ partners should also be invited. The largest most general organization (LTO) recruited eight individuals (among which were two couples) from the northern, non-pig-dense part of the country. The National Young Farmers Organization (NAJK) recruited five farmers from the highly pig-intensive south of the country. The reactive, opponent National Pig Farmers Union (NVV) delivered a group of four farmers from central Netherlands. The last two groups were existing study groups, whereas not all of the individuals in the first group were acquainted with each other.

5.2. *Evening Discussion*

Use of the term “welfare” was avoided in both the invitation and the evening introduction. The farmers were invited to share their views on the term “respect,” motivated by the argument that the Ministry of Agriculture was interested in their views and opportunities on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). After a short introduction, everyone was asked to introduce themselves and their farm, saying what they were proud of. Then, a fixed set of subjects was discussed:

- What does “being a pig farmer” mean?
- What does the term “respect to (your) animals” mean to you?
- Does the term “respect” bear more weight than the “no-suffering” argument?
- What would you do if you could spend 100,000 euro on your animals?

The focus group leaders attempted to get the individual views of the participants instead of allowing the group to work towards consensus.

5.3. *Aptness of the Results*

In view of the marked contrast between the three organizations and regions, the results can be taken as indicative of a substantial portion of the Dutch pig farmer population. Clearly, the sample cannot be perceived as representative, since the participants were pre-selected on their willingness to discuss this topic, and the national, regional, and organizational differences. This non-representative character of the group composition was not thought to be important to the qualitative research. Other methodological choices, such as avoidance of the term welfare by the interviewers and strategies to prevent or discern socially desirable answers, will not be worked out here.

5.4. *Results*

Briefly, the key motives for being a farmer can be expressed by the terms *freedom*, *care*, and *challenge*. Economic drive did not emerge as being a prime motive, but mentioned as a prerequisite for continuity. An interesting example was a story about saving life-threatened individual pigs just for the sake of the animal and for the satisfaction of the endeavor.

5.5. *The Weight of the Term Respect*

All examples and values that farmers spontaneously replied in answer to “respect for the animal” were related to the fact that farmers realized that animals can suffer and that their role is to minimize this. Terms like

“welfare,” “good life,” and “suffering” spontaneously came up to explain their views. The question of how to handle a dead animal was an exception to this rule, the reason being that dead animals are treated differently than “inanimate objects.” Instead of dragging animals over the farmyard, for instance, a vehicle is used to carry them. The underlying motive given, however, was not to offend outsiders rather than out of respect for the animals, which fits in with the third shared value of the three-notion concept (non-appalling appearance). The farmers did not produce examples beyond the suffering notion, but when explicitly urged to look for them, they came up with far-fetched scenarios, such as genetic modification and their norms to maintain species-specific characteristics of farm animals.

The results imply that the intrinsic value concept plays no unique role in farmers’ attitudes towards their animals, however, respect for animals is synonymous with their view on animal welfare. Their attitude towards animals is motivated by the first notion: suffering should be avoided or minimized. Being aware of how other societal groups perceive animals, they adapt their procedures accordingly. Presumably, they unconsciously take the non-appalling appearance into account primarily basing their notion of “doing good to animals” on their notion that animals should not suffer. It must be said, however, that farmers’ views on their animals cannot be seen as fully utilitarian. Stafleu et al. (2004) elaborate on this aspect. Concepts on social and especially psychological strategies that play a role in these views and attitudes (e.g., collective cognitive dissonance) will surely add to understanding the group views on their own practices, but will not be worked out here.

6. SOME EXTRA REMARKS ON “FARMERS VIEWS ON GOOD WELFARE”

Analysis of the views of farmers on “doing good to animals” in the three sessions produces a fairly consistent result. The collective view is that provision of adequate supply, such as food and water together with a good health care, makes good welfare, by definition. At detail level, adequate (= common!) housing conditions are seen as part of that system. Expressed thoughts behind this are that the animals serve a purpose and therefore it is normal to balance their interests with those of the producer. However, animals should not suffer, so a farmer’s role is to deliver good care as far as possible to prevent avoidable suffering and normal practice with good intentions are thought to be adequate.

Interestingly, the farmers were aware that their norms of dealing with animals develop in time too. Individuals spontaneously judged the ban on

tethering of sows as being legitimate. “Although that system was not good, we thought it was normal.” Freedom to “express natural behavior” was mentioned as the norm; the former system of tethering sows was seen as an infringement. Current facilities and procedures were judged as being adequate for pigs. When asked for a theoretical spending of 100,000 euro on their animals, however, most of them chose more space for the animals. This illustrates their view that current practices provide adequate living conditions, but that improvements are possible and should be seen as an extra, a luxury also attractive to the farmers themselves. Application of straw was also mentioned as a non-essential but attractive improvement, for them and their animals and also to relieve societal unease.

Current practices (including those superimposed by regulation) thus seem to function as normative conduct for farmers. Furthermore, the norm leans heavily on the intention: “you do what is reasonable and within the bounds of possibility, meaning good welfare. If the actual outcome is disappointing, it is not because of bad welfare, that’s life. You’ve done your best.”

The results from the exploratory study among farmers indicate a useful basis for the design of value-based acceptable intensive animal husbandry systems. The farmers’ professional values of entrepreneurship, care, and challenge do not conflict with their obligations to their animals. Striving towards providing their animals with a good life, especially through professional care and adequate housing conditions, is easily convertible into system requirements. The conflict between the farmers and the public is seen as one of image and of interests rather than a deeply normative problem.

Over the past decade, European governments have chosen the no-suffering option on behalf of the public by imposing husbandry requirements through legislation. Surveying the farmers’ views on acceptable and desirable practices on animals presented above, the incompatibility between governmental legislative interventions and farmers’ views would appear to be less than at first glance. Principally, they are both reactions to the rationale of good husbandry requirements for the animals. The results of the focus groups indicate that the farmers adapt their norms to the legal standards accordingly. However, this rational approach does not meet the notions (image) that matter to the public. Intensive farming conditions will not meet the public’s key desires and will, therefore, not be trusted as being “good for the animals.” As the level of keeping the public informed is unavoidably limited, a gap in both understanding and acceptance will remain.

Design efforts based on the shared no-suffering notion, do not address the aesthetic aspects that matter to the public. While the focus on the no-suffering value approach is easy to communicate, its result is clearly difficult to sell to the public. A straightforward reasoning is that solutions based on

the approach will result in (NGO-) tolerated husbandry systems, but not in desired, attractive solutions.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The strategy to choose minimization of animal suffering as a priority when designing acceptable animal husbandry strategies is effective in a multi-stakeholder environment, especially when adopting the underlying concept of explicit distinction between and prioritization of the values. This approach can be seen as a way to enhance transparency in the farm animal welfare debate. The key remaining challenge is to gain the public's trust in the hypothesis that legal farming practices based on no suffering are indeed ethically defensible. Other notions such as naturalness and aesthetics also come into play within certain stakeholder groups, but results indicate that the animal-related values of farmers are predominantly related to the suffering issue.

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