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Vigors, Belinda; Lawrence, AB

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Positive Animal Welfare: Similarities and differences between scientific and farmer perspectives¹

Belinda Vigors and Alistair Lawrence²

Key message: Improving farm animal welfare requires not only minimising harms but also providing opportunities for animals to have positive experiences. This brief examines where farmers’ perspectives align with and diverge from scientific perspectives of positive welfare and highlights areas where positive welfare could be furthered.

Main Findings

- This policy brief draws from interview and survey studies which examined farmers’ perspectives of positive animal welfare (PAW) and a review of the scientific literature on PAW.
- The science of PAW is characterised by a focus on: (i) *positive emotions*; (ii) *positive affective engagement* (behaviours which animals are motivated to do) (iii) *quality of life* (a balance, where positives outweigh negatives) and; (iv) *happiness* (how animals feel most of the time, with positive emotions outweighing negative emotions)³.
- Farmers perspectives of PAW are characterised by: (i) prioritising the *minimisation of harms* (e.g. stress, health issues); (ii) positive *human-animal interactions*; (iii) supporting animal *autonomy*; (iv) using *play* as an indicator of welfare; (v) supporting *social interaction*; (vi) enabling *natural behaviours* and; (vii) *positive emotions* (animals that are happy-content, happy-energised or experiencing pleasure)^{4,5}.

There are similarities and differences in how farmers frame and view PAW and how science frames and views PAW; farmers

	Scientific Perspective	1 Positive Emotions	2 Positive Affective Engagement	3 Quality of Life	4 Happiness
Farmer Perspective					
Minimisation of harms		X	X	X	X
Positive human-animal interactions		✓	X	X	X
Autonomy		X	✓	X	X
Play		✓	✓	X	X
Social Interaction		✓	✓	X	X
Natural behaviours		X	✓	X	X
Positive Emotions		✓	✓	X	✓
Happy-Content		✓	✓	X	X
Happy-Energised		✓	✓	X	X
Pleasure		✓	✓	X	X

¹ This research was undertaken within the Scottish Government Rural Affairs and the Environment Strategic Research Programme 2016-2021, under Theme 2, Research Deliverable on Livestock Welfare (2.2.7): Productive and Sustainable Land Management and Rural Economies, For more information please see: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Research/About/EBAR/StrategicResearch/strategicresearch2016-21>.

² Contact: Belinda Vigors, Animal Behaviour and Welfare Research Group, Animal and Veterinary Sciences, SRUC. 07884546902. belinda.vigors@sruc.ac.uk.

Introduction

PAW highlights the welfare benefits of providing farm animals with opportunities to engage in positive experiences, in addition to minimising negative experiences. A review of the scientific literature³ found that PAW research is characterised by (i) a focus on the welfare benefits of positive emotions; (ii) animals engaging in behaviours they innately want to do, and which provide them pleasure or bring about positive emotions; (iii) an overall outweighing of negative experiences by positive experiences to bring about quality of life and; (iv) happiness, which takes account of how animals feel overall, where happiness stems from positive emotions outweighing negative emotions. Qualitative interview⁴ and quantitative survey⁵ research with livestock farmers demonstrates some similarities between the scientific and farmer perspectives of PAW, as indicated by the figure above. For instance, farmers highlight the importance of positive human-animal interactions (e.g. respectful handling) which would support positive emotions, and play and social interaction which would enable positive affective engagement.

However, this research also indicated that farmers see their role as primarily to minimise harms (e.g. stress and health issues) and ensure their animal's resource needs are met (e.g. appropriate feed, comfortable environment). Consequently, farmers' perspectives on PAW rarely consider the whole life experience of the animal that is seen in the scientific perspectives of 'quality of life' and 'happiness'. For many farmers, their direct priority for welfare remains on minimising negatives, rather than the overall outweighing of negative experiences by positive across an animal's life.

Methods

This brief drew on findings from (i) a qualitative interview study exploring farmers' perspectives of PAW; (ii) a quantitative survey examining how farmers judge animal well-being under varying health and natural behaviour conditions and; (iii) a review of the scientific literature on PAW. The findings are limited to the relatively small sample size of the interview (n=28) and survey (n=169) study and a focus on extensive farming systems (e.g. beef and sheep, pasture-based dairy). Findings are not representative of the livestock farming sector in the UK or Scotland.

Policy Implications

- Similarities and overlaps between farmer and scientific perspectives of PAW provide a good starting point for policies aimed at improving farm animal welfare and developing an industry-wide consensus on PAW.
- Farmers constructing their primary care-giving role as that of minimising harms may act as a barrier to the development of best practice PAW. To encourage a shift in focus throughout the industry, future policies on animal welfare may need to frame welfare in terms of the whole life perspective of the animal, where the balance of positives and negative experiences for farm animals is considered.

For more information on the work of SRUC's Rural Policy Centre, please contact the team on:

T: 0131 535 4256; E: rpc@sruc.ac.uk; W: www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre



³ Lawrence, A.B.; Vigers, B.; Sandøe, P. What Is so Positive about Positive Animal Welfare?—A Critical Review of the Literature. *Animals* **2019**, *9*, 783, doi:[10.3390/ani9100783](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9100783).

⁴ Vigers, B.; Lawrence, A. What Are the Positives? Exploring Positive Welfare Indicators in a Qualitative Interview Study with Livestock Farmers. *Animals* **2019**, *9*, 694, doi:[10.3390/ani9090694](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9090694).

⁵ Vigers, B.; Ewing, D.A.; Lawrence, A.B. The importance of farm animal health and natural behaviours to livestock farmers: findings from a factorial survey using vignettes. *Front. Anim. Sci.* **2021**, doi: 10.3389/fanim.2021.638782