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Citizen views on welfare and rights of farmed animals in food production

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Abstract

Animal production is increasingly contested in food-related discourses and practices due to increasing knowledge about animal welfare, the rise of the animal rights movement, and ecological problems exacerbated by animal production. However, these developments have not resulted in decreases in consumption of animal products even though the number of vegetarians and vegans is gradually rising in many Western countries. In this paper we analyse the meanings, justifications, and ethical perspectives related to animal rights and welfare by omnivores, vegetarians and vegans. The data is based on a survey conducted in cooperation with the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, including an open-ended question asking how, in the respondent’s opinion, animal welfare and rights should be taken into account in food production. In total 22,803 people completed the survey. The data for this paper comprise 5,933 answers to the question above. The results of qualitative content analysis suggest that animal welfare was regarded as important generally in all groups. However, omnivores’ comments relied on a multitude of ethical perspectives and presented a range of views varying from stressing good living conditions and avoidance of (unnecessary) suffering to denial of animal rights. Vegans’ comments strongly questioned current animal production. Vegetarians’ arguments often used hybrids of utilitarian and animal rights views and stressed welfare and species-specific behaviours, although the value of animal life as such was also recognised. The results evidence contested views on the future of animal production.

Keywords

animal rights, animal welfare, qualitative research, omnivores, vegetarians, vegans

Corrigendum: Explanation about an error in the dataset used in the analysis for the paper by Niva & Mäkelä in EurSAFE Proceedings 2021

For the article, we did a qualitative reading of responses from a non-representative sample of Finnish readers of a newspaper Helsingin Sanomat to an open-ended survey question asking how the respondents thought animal welfare and rights should be taken into account in food production. We did a qualitative reading and identification of themes in the responses in order to identify differences in the meanings and ethical perspectives to animal rights and welfare between three dietary groups: omnivores, vegetarians and vegans.

For the paper we read and identified themes in responses from 5,933 respondents, of whom 3,397 were from omnivores (57%), 1,458 from vegetarians (25%) and 1,078 from vegans (18%). The paper is based on this dataset, which is large in itself. The three groups were identified by filtering the responses based on the respondent's self-reported diets in an Excel file. Respondents who reported to strictly follow a vegetarian or vegan diet were defined as vegetarians or vegans, respectively. Omnivores were defined as people who did not follow vegan or vegetarian diet and did not avoid red meat, nor were making any effort to adopt such diets.

After the paper was accepted and published, we continued the analysis by doing a quantitative content analysis which enabled us to quantify the prevalence of the various themes that emerged in the responses by the three groups. While doing the coding for the quantitative content analysis in Atlas/ti programme we discovered that unfortunately a part of the respondents who, based on their dietary categorisation, should have been included in the analysis for this paper had been accidentally left out. The mistake took place in copying the written responses to separate Excel files for each dietary group. It turned out that the actual total number of respondents in the three groups was 8,175, of whom 5,441 were omnivores (67%), 1,653 vegetarians (20%) and 1,081 vegans (13%). The majority of the responses that had been left out from the analysis in the paper thus came from omnivore respondents, of whom 2,044 (38% of the total number of omnivores in the corrected data) had been left out. Of vegetarians, 195 (12%) had been left out. The number of responses from vegans remained practically the same.

In order to identify whether the error had led to biases in the results of the paper published in the Proceedings, we analysed the responses in the data that were left out. We found that the themes that were identified in the data used for the paper (N=5,933) were detected also in the additional responses (N=2,242), and that the additional responses did not bring out novel themes. Thus, the qualitative results presented in the paper do not change based on the additional data. It can also be noted that in such a large dataset saturation of themes in qualitative analysis occurs with even a smaller subset of the data than the one we used in the analysis for the paper. Furthermore, comparison of gender, mean age, education and answers to various food consumption related and attitudinal questions in the data used for the paper and the additional data showed that for omnivores, there were no substantial differences. For vegetarians, the respondents in the additional data (N=195) were on average a few years older compared to the data used for the paper and somewhat more positive towards the use of animals in food production than the vegetarian respondents in the data used in the paper (N=1,458). The additional vegetarian respondents also had less interest in vegan eating. However, the additional vegetarian respondents formed only 12% of the vegetarians in the corrected data, and the themes brought out by these respondents were similar to those observed in the original analysis.

Our conclusion is that the unfortunate error in extracting the data for this paper from the whole dataset does not bias or undermine the results presented in the paper.

Introduction

In affluent societies animal production is increasingly contested in food-related discourses. This is related to several developments in which, first, the rights and welfare of farmed animals particularly in intensive farming have been questioned. As more is known about animal sentience and mind, it has become increasingly difficult to defend poor living conditions of farmed animals (e.g., Kupsala 2019). Second, climate change and other ecological problems as well as the health impacts of excessive meat consumption in the global north raise increasing concerns about the ecological, economic and social consequences of animal-based food production.

In affluent countries per capita consumption of meat seems to have reached a saturation level, but with growing populations, global production and consumption of meat, particularly poultry, is increasing (e.g., OECD and FAO 2020). Meat and other animal products are highly valued, and giving up habitual use of animal-based products is not easy (Niva et al. 2017). In Western countries meat as the centre of the meal is appreciated as tasty and healthy, and is assigned meanings of power and masculinity (e.g., de Bakker & Dagevos 2012). Earlier quantitative research indicates that people following omnivore, vegetarian or vegan diets apply divergent animal ethics approaches, and that omnivores tend to approach animals from a more mixed ethical perspective compared to vegans and vegetarians (Lund et al. 2016).

In this paper we examine omnivore, vegetarian and vegan perspectives on rights and welfare of farmed animals from a qualitative perspective. We analyse how people following the three diets give meanings and conceptualise rights and welfare issues. In the concluding section, we apply the concepts of justifications and excuses ('accounts', see Scott and Lyman 1968) to examine what kinds of explanations the respondents used in defending animal production and challenging the paying of attention to animal welfare and rights. In addition, we take a look at the roles that the five ethical perspectives differentiated by Sandøe and Christiansen (2008) – contractarianism (focusing on human self-interest), utilitarianism (taking into account the interests of all affected sentient beings), animal rights view (emphasising respect for life), relational view (stressing human-animal relations), and respect for nature view (protecting species and ecosystems) – play in the accounts presented. We also apply the framework for 'good animal life' by the same authors (Sandøe and Christiansen 2008) to see how the accounts make use of the ideas of hedonism/pleasure (that good animal life entails as many positive and as few negative experiences for the animal as possible), perfectionism (that the animals are able to realise species-specific potential and to "live in accordance with their nature", *ibid.*, 36) and preference theory (that the preferences of the animal are satisfied).

Materials and methods

The data of the study is based on a survey conducted in Finland, carried out in co-operation with the largest Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, which invited readers to respond to a survey including both structured and open-ended questions related to diets, food consumption and food-related motives and attitudes. The survey was open in March 1–21, 2020, and 22,803 readers completed it. The respondents were not representative of the Finnish population: 72% were women, 67% had at least Bachelor level education and 46% lived in the capital area. One of the open-ended questions asked: 'The use of animals in food production has recently been criticized in public discussion. In your opinion, how should animal well-being and rights be taken into account in food production?' (it was not obligatory to give an answer). It should be noted that the respondents were not provided an explanation about what 'welfare' and 'rights' mean, i.e., the respondents relied on their own understandings of the concepts. This enabled us to examine how the respondents understood the concepts and what kinds of meanings the concepts were assigned.

Respondents' diets were inquired by asking whether they follow a special diet with response options 1) 'I don't follow at the moment', 2) 'I try go to this direction', 3) 'I follow quite closely', and 4) 'I follow closely'. In this paper, three diet variables are used to categorise the respondents into vegans, vegetarians and omnivores: 'vegan (no animal products at all)', 'vegetarian diet with eggs and/or milk products', and 'diet with no red meat'. Those who selected response option 4 for the vegan diet were defined as vegans, and those who selected option 4 for the vegetarian diet were defined as vegetarians. Finally, those who selected option 1 for vegan and vegetarian diets as well as for a diet without red meat were defined as omnivores. This allowed us to select 'strict' followers of each diet into the analysis. The data used in this paper consist of 5,933 responses to the open question above, of which 3,397 were from omnivores (57%), 1,458 from vegetarians (25%) and 1,078 from vegans (18%).

The length of the responses varied from a few words to a whole paragraph with detailed reflection on animal welfare and rights. A typical length of a response was 1–3 sentences, with vegans (on average 28 words) and vegetarians (27 words) writing somewhat longer comments than omnivores (20 words). We analysed the responses with qualitative content analysis, paying attention to the themes and arguments brought out in each response, and reflecting on them as 'accounts' and as demonstrations of different ethical perspectives and ideas of good animal life. Due to the variety of themes brought out in the responses and lack of space, we describe the most prevalent themes in more detail and give less emphasis to the themes that were mentioned more infrequently. In the following we present the findings of the analysis for each group separately, and finally discuss the differences and similarities of the groups in terms of justifications, ethical perspectives and ideas of good animal life.

Results

The comments by all three groups included not only direct answers to what was asked ('how should animal welfare and rights be taken into account in food production?') but also comments about the importance of the issue, the acceptability of using and eating animals, the place of animals in society, the subjectivity and rights of animals, and the current state of animal welfare and rights in Finland. There were substantial differences in how these issues were approached in the three groups, and the differences were largely related to what kind of ethical perspective can be seen as the basis of the views.

Omnivores: reconciling animal welfare and the eating of animal products

Among omnivores, a variety of meanings were assigned to animal welfare. *The importance of welfare issues* was acknowledged in a large majority of the responses. The comments were often declaratory or expressed a deontic modality, stating that animals must/should be treated 'well', 'humanely', 'with respect', or 'properly': 'Animals need to have a good life and they must be treated well to the end' (60-year-old woman).

Many brought out *elements of what was regarded as good treatment*, including, e.g., 'good', 'appropriate', 'natural' or 'sufficient' living conditions, sufficiency of space, freedom of movement, possibility of species-specific behaviour, appropriate or 'natural' food (indeed, instead of 'feed', the respondents most often wrote about 'food' or 'nutrition' for the animals), possibility for grazing, good health, proper medication, short transport distances, painless slaughtering and avoidance of (unnecessary) suffering. Industrial/mass production was problematized, and small-scale, family farming was supported. Organic production was mentioned as a method enabling better welfare; although it was also criticised, often without specifying why. It was noted that better welfare induces costs, and some were willing to pay more if there was a certification or a product label guaranteeing animal welfare (apart from organic production, at the moment such a welfare label scheme does not exist in Finland).

Many of the omnivores' comments on the importance or characteristics of animal welfare were supplemented with a note about the *benefits accrued for humans* of such measures: the welfare of the animal was believed to lead to i) better productivity and success for the farmer ('An animal that is well produces better', wrote a 61-year-old man), or ii) better taste, healthiness and quality of the product ('A well-treated animal tastes better', noted a 31-year-old man). Here, animal welfare was not assigned value in itself but was rather presented as something serving human self-interest and ultimately benefiting the human community, maximising the pleasure and well-being of the eater or the financial gain of the producer. However, it was also noted that only farmers who are well themselves are able to take good care for the animals, and thus the farmers need a decent compensation for their work.

It was often explicitly remarked that farmed animals are *meant for human consumption*; a state of affairs which the omnivores rarely questioned. Using animals in food production was regarded as acceptable provided that animals are properly taken care of: '[t]his is about farmed animals, and they exist in order to produce food for people. However, their suffering must be minimised' (39-year-old man). A related normalisation of animal production could be seen in presenting meat-eating as 'natural', 'age-old', or part of the 'cycle of nature', and in describing *humans as 'meat-eaters' or 'omnivores'*: 'I think animal-based food is naturally part of the human diet' (55-year-old man). Often such comments also reflected on animal welfare, but others left the welfare implications of the 'naturalness' of eating animals open.

In omnivores' comments, the focus was indeed on welfare issues, and *a minority of the responses explicitly mentioned animal rights*. In these comments, animal rights were conceptualised largely in terms of a right to good treatment and good life: 'Animals must have a right to welfare' (32-year-old woman). On the other hand, animal rights were also questioned outright by maintaining that 'animals do not have rights' (several respondents). 'Humanisation' of animals was criticised, and animals were differentiated from humans.

A very prominent thread in the comments included *constructing an opposition between animal production in Finland and elsewhere*. Finnish animal production was praised as 'good', 'proper', 'ethical' or 'top-quality', whereas the treatment of animals in (many) other countries was regarded as 'poor'. Generally these comments were presented as factual propositions suggesting that the level of animal welfare and the regulatory mechanism governing it are already high enough in Finland and consequently nothing more is needed: 'They [animal welfare and rights] are already well taken into account!' (48-year-old man). Despite its prominence, the view of the properness of Finnish farming practices was not unanimously shared: an opposite perspective suggested that the current *laws, requirements, control mechanisms and sanctions are not sufficient* to guarantee animal welfare.

Other, minor themes included, e.g., support for reducing animal-based production, descriptions about one's own efforts to eat more ethically (e.g. buying organic, local or domestic food, eating game, or reducing meat eating); comments on the polarisation of the public discourse; and reproaching the critics of animal production, such as vegans, urbanites 'estranged' from food production, and the media, for exaggerating the problems of animal welfare and rights, and for creating unnecessary controversies.

Vegetarians: ambivalence in accepting animal production

To some extent vegetarians shared many views with omnivores. Animal welfare, its regulation and control were considered to be important and it was stressed that animals must be treated well, 'humanely' or 'with respect', with possibility for species-specific behaviours. Often, however, such comments showed *a more critical tone compared to omnivores*: 'Present day intensive production is completely wrong and extremely cruel. [--] The living conditions of animals should be improved radically' (35-year-old woman). Animal production

in general and intensive production in particular were heavily criticised. It was also noted that animal production is principally unethical, but if it cannot be totally given up, animal suffering must be minimised. Organic production and welfare certificates were supported.

Compared to omnivores, vegetarians' comments were more divided in terms of whether the use of animals in food production was regarded in principle acceptable at all. Some, consistently with the reported vegetarian diet, made a *distinction between eating animals (meat) and eating the foods that animals produce (milk, eggs)*, and accepted the latter but not the former. In some comments the perceived moral difference between killing for food and utilising what animals produce was explicitly brought out. Some regarded using animals in meat production as morally wrong, but accepted the eating of game. A few suggested that dairy cows and egg-laying hens should have a right to retire instead of being slaughtered. However, many *questioned the right of humans to use animals in food production for any purposes, including milk and egg production*. This can be partly explained by the fact a large majority of those who reported to strictly follow a vegetarian diet also reported an interest in vegan diet either by following a vegan diet quite closely or by trying to go to this direction. Whereas among omnivores, it was not unusual to deny that animals have rights, many vegetarians, particularly those with interest in vegan eating, stressed animal rights as a basic principle that must guide food production. Some conceptualised rights as a right to welfare (similarly to omnivores), but more often they were seen as a right not be exploited by humans.

It was noted that animals are sentient beings, and that they should not be treated instrumentally as 'production machines'. It was suggested that *the target should be gradually ending or at least considerably reducing meat/milk/egg production/eating*. Policies, e.g., stopping or reducing agricultural subsidies or inducing taxes on animal production, were supported to increase the price of meat and to turn meat a luxury food. At the same time, it was noted that farmers need to be supported to find new, plant-based production lines.

Vegans: using animals in food production should be stopped or phased out

Among the three groups, vegans were, unsurprisingly, most critical towards food production and the eating of animal-based foods. Most vegans started from the premise that since *the oppression and exploitation of animals by humans cannot be accepted*, their use in food production should be stopped. The *right of humans to raise and kill animals for food was contested*, particularly today, when animal-based foods are not needed for survival. It was insisted that 'animals should not be used in food production' and that 'animals should not be eaten'. Cultural preferences, habits and pleasure were not considered to justify the exploitation of animals. From this perspective, *improving welfare is not enough*.

Others adopted the view that even though the use of animals is wrong, it is not likely that animal production can be totally closed down in the near future (or ever). From this perspective, *many considered an incremental approach more realistic than a radical turn to plant-based farming and eating*. 'Animals should not be utilized at all in food production, but since there's a long way to go to that, the living conditions of farmed animals should be improved first' (27-year-old woman). Similarly to omnivores and vegetarians, measures for improving animal welfare (e.g. reform of subsidies, taxation, banning cruel practices, informing the public about the conditions at farms, etc.) were suggested, and it was noted that animal production must be reduced. However, the 'ideal' and 'utopia' was a 'vegan society'.

It was argued that animals should be respected as sentient beings, and that they are not supposed to be slaves or means of production but individuals with *rights equal to humans or pets*. 'Animals are not here for us, but with us' (22-year-old woman). Some, however, considered it as acceptable to keep hens at home yard or a small number of animals in family farms in which good care can be assured. Some accepted hunting and sustainable fishing

since they ‘do not make animals factories’ (27-year-old woman). A minority of the comments focused solely on animal welfare without commenting on the morality of eating animals.

Discussion and conclusion

The results show that animal welfare gained support in all three groups, while rights were emphasised mainly by vegans and vegetarians. In terms of *good life* (Sandøe & Christiansen 2008), all groups supported both the pleasure principle and perfectionism: that through good care, farmed animals’ negative experiences must be minimised and positive experiences maximised, and that animals must have a possibility for species-specific behaviours. Here it should be noted that vegans strongly stressed the giving up of animal agriculture and did not always take a stand on animal welfare. Accounts relying directly on preference-theoretical ideas were rarer, although comments stressing that animals should have a ‘natural’ life and that farming violates that right, as well as those condemning animal farming but accepting the eating of game can be interpreted to support the perfectionist view.

When looking at the justifications and the ethical perspectives applied we can find substantial differences between the groups. Particularly in omnivores’ accounts, we can discern *excuses and justifications*, first, for eating meat, and secondly, for the idea that nothing in particular that needs to be done in food production to take animal welfare and rights into account. The main excuses and justifications for meat eating and use of animals in food production included depicting humans as natural meat eaters, presenting meat as a healthy food, denying animal rights, and emphasising the benefits of meat/animal production to Finnish agriculture and farmers. The accounts that challenged the need to pay attention to animal welfare and rights appealed to allegedly well-functioning regulation, responsible practices of Finnish farmers and good state of animal welfare, and similarly to above, denying animal rights. In Scott and Lyman’s terms (1968), such accounts demonstrate both denial of victim (‘animals have no rights’), denial of injury (‘animals are already well treated’), appeal to loyalty (‘Finnish farmers act responsibly’), appeal to defeasibility (‘regulation works already well’), and appeal to a biological drive (‘humans are meat-eaters’, ‘meat is healthy’).

As regards the *ethical perspectives* (Sandøe & Christiansen 2008), the differences between the three groups are evident. Omnivores’ comments relied on a multitude of ethical perspectives, including a contractual view (focusing on human interests and leaving the interests of other sentient beings aside), a utilitarian perspective (taking animals’ interests into account and focusing on reduction of suffering), and a relational view (seeing that the relation between the farmer and the animal is characterised by both good care and eventual killing). Vegetarians often used hybrids of utilitarian and animal rights views, objecting the killing of animals but accepting the production of milk and eggs with very high levels of animal welfare. In our data vegetarian perspectives in many ways aligned with those of vegans, of whom most relied on animal rights perspective but allowed for a gradual process towards a vegan world. There was support in all three groups for a ‘reform strategy’ (Sandøe & Christiansen 2008, 73) focusing on improving animal welfare, although in varying degrees; whereas a ‘revolutionary change’ with the target of giving up animal production, was supported by vegetarians and vegans.

Despite the fact that our data is not generalizable to the Finnish population, the results suggest that there is wide-spread support to paying attention to animal welfare in food production. However, the understandings of what ‘welfare’ entails, vary. The widespread view among omnivores emphasising that Finnish regulatory and farming practices already secure a high enough level of animal welfare may slow down public demands for improvements. Animal rights are a more contested field compared to animal welfare: from the omnivore perspective, rights are limited to welfare issues, while vegans and to some extent vegetarians conceptualise

rights in terms of a right not to be exploited by humans. Such fundamental differences in ideas about the ethics of farming and eating animals are not easily reconciled.

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