

Consumers link ‘better’ farm animal welfare with better quality products

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Summary

Current consumer concern with farm animal welfare is part of ethical consumerism where consumers seek to reduce the impact of their choices on “moral others”. We have been examining consumers’ motivations to purchase food with animal welfare claims across two projects using qualitative approaches. Results suggest that consumers strongly link animal welfare claims with superior product quality. Consumers perceive that red meat production is extensive, in contrast to eggs, chicken meat and pork production. However concerns about “unnatural” diets and confinement during transport in red meat production mirror concerns about intensive production systems. Understanding how consumers think about farm animal welfare and the role it plays in purchasing decisions is key to engaging both consumers and producers in discussions about how to develop animal products that are affordable, safe, nutritious, sustainably produced, and humanely produced.

Introduction

Increasing sales of animal products with welfare claims and recent campaigns by animal advocacy groups have been linked to increased public concern with farm animal welfare. While *community/citizen* concern for farm animal welfare arguably began in the 1960s (Woods 2011), current *consumer* concern for farm animal welfare can be considered as part of growing and more widespread interest in so-called ethical food production, in which consumers make choices that have reduced impact on ‘moral others’ such as communities of people, animals or the environment, and may seek to influence food production systems (Ankeny 2012).

Our initial project (ARC Discovery Project DP110105062) aimed to understand why Australians make what they consider to be ethical choices when purchasing food. When discussing purchases of animal products with our participants (described further below) conversations were predominantly about eggs, with little discussion of meat (Bray & Ankeny forthcoming). These findings prompted us to initiate a new project (ARC Linkage Project 130100419) to explore specifically whether concern for animal welfare is influencing meat purchases. Here we present a summary of the findings from DP110105062 on egg purchases (Bray & Ankeny forthcoming) and preliminary findings from LP130100419 on consumer attitudes to sheep and beef cattle welfare.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative approaches guided the research design and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Participants for focus groups were recruited through community announcements, newsletters, social media, and flyers distributed at public events. Focus groups lasted for an hour and used semi-scripted, open-ended prompts that allowed participants to explore the reasoning underlying their responses to the questions posed, and connect them to other food purchasing practices as well as broader social and ethical issues. Interviews were held in shopping centres (Bush & Hair 1985) to ensure that we included participants of diverse ethnicities and lower incomes. Interviews were based on a modified script to allow exploration of the issues in a shorter time frame (15-20 minutes) whilst still allowing participants to

explore the reasoning behind their answers in dialogue with the interviewer. Qualitative data collection focuses on the range of opinions and representations of an issue rather than counting opinions or people, and sampling is considered adequate when no new themes emerge from the data (Gaskell 2000). DP110105062 involved 73 participants from Adelaide. LP130100149 involved 53 participants in Adelaide, Toowoomba and Melbourne.

Focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and checked for accuracy against hand-recorded notes. Analysis was performed by one researcher coding the transcripts for major themes emerging from the data, similar to the “open coding” method described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) using a general inductive approach. Validity was checked by a second researcher by comparing these themes to those identified independently by her in the transcripts.

Results and Discussion

1. Free-range and cage-free eggs (DP110105062)

Free-range or cage-free designators on labels serve as proxies for quality. Participants explained that, in comparison to intensively-produced eggs, free-range eggs had superior sensory characteristics (in particular their taste and yolk colour), and attributed these characteristics to the animal’s ‘more natural’ diet. Quality was mentioned much more readily as a motivating factor for purchase than concerns about animal welfare. Free-range eggs also were thought to be healthier and safer in contrast to eggs produced in intensive systems. Participants perceived risk in the ‘unknown’ composition and use of ‘chemicals’ in hen diets.

Four key factors emerged from the data to explain the dominance of free-range eggs over other products with animal welfare claims:

- a) High levels of awareness about the use of cages in egg production. Participants mentioned recent advertisements by activist groups as well as documentaries and the activities of celebrity chefs as sources of information.
- b) Participants mentioned clear labelling and prominent positioning of free-range eggs within the supermarket compared with other welfare products with welfare claims.

c) The price difference between caged eggs and other egg products was perceived to be minimal enough that even those from lower socio-economic groups could afford free-range eggs. Meat is considered an expensive item; animal welfare claims make it more so.

d) There has been a recent increase in 'backyard chooks' in many Australian cities. Thus some participants described preferring eggs from their own hens or sourcing them from friends or family, and would describe these as 'free-range'.

2. Red meat

Participants in LP130100419 contrasted the extensive nature of sheep and beef cattle production with intensive production systems used in poultry and pigs, both in terms of product quality and animal welfare. Concerns about intensive production and perceived negative impacts on product quality and safety were more readily spoken of as a motivation to purchase free range pork, chicken and eggs than red meat. Grazing production systems were described by participants in connection to the production of beef and sheep meat, were seen as preferable, and enabled the animals engage in natural behaviours. Some participants were unaware about sheep and beef production methods. There was little mention of feedlots or other intensive production methods in relation to sheep and beef cattle, and these were mostly mentioned in connection with experiences overseas, such as in the USA or Europe.

Similar to the previous project however, themes relating to a 'natural diet' and confinement emerged from participant responses. 'Grass-fed' beef was linked to a 'natural diet' by consumers of that product, the corollary of which is that grain based diets are unnatural and have negative impacts on both meat quality and animal welfare. The use of agricultural chemicals in grain production contributed to this perception. Confinement during transportation was problematic for many participants, despite transportation standards to limit movement and minimise bruising. Animal stress was perceived as having a negative impact on meat quality. Overall, red meat purchasing decisions were motivated by price, with some participants commenting that organic and grass-fed products were more expensive. There was a strong preference for Australian product. In addition, consumers did not understand some of the claims currently made on meat labels and so bought from sources they trusted.

Discussion

Although the results presented from LP130100419 are preliminary, we can begin to identify complementary themes across both projects. On the surface it seems there is a much higher awareness of practices involved in egg production than those used in the red meat sector. Campaigns to raise awareness of (and end) caged egg production, advocacy from celebrity chefs, and active promotion by the retail sector of free range eggs (Parker et al. 2013) have been recent prominent influences, but it is difficult to estimate what levels of awareness of caged egg production existed before these campaigns, and if these are the only sources of information. In contrast, red meat production is associated with extensive production particularly when compared to eggs, chicken meat, and pigs. Sheep and cattle are raised 'out in a paddock' and hence typical farm animal welfare issues perceived by consumers such as confinement did not arise as

spontaneously in conversations about red meat production. Although red meat has been marketed as 'grain-fed' for some time (Bindon & Jones 2001), current promotion of grass-fed beef may be raising awareness of the role of grains in beef cattle diets in new ways, and concerns about 'naturalness' and food safety with grain-fed cattle mirror those raised in connection to free-range eggs. However, unlike eggs, the connection between animal diet and distinct sensory characteristics in meat is well accepted by both the public and research community, and price premiums for quality complicate the issue further.

Our findings suggest that for most consumers, good animal welfare is closely associated with higher product quality including sensory characteristics such as taste and colour, nutritional quality, and food safety, and that these latter aspects are stronger drivers for consumers' purchasing decisions than issues relating directly to concerns about the animals. This is not to say that consumers do not care about farm animal welfare, or more explicitly, farm animal *suffering*, but more that in general these issues are not considered in isolation when choosing what food to purchase. Natural behaviours and in particular a natural diet are seen to be linked to extensive and 'free-range' systems that have direct and desirable consequences for consumers as well as being perceived as having better animal welfare generally. Understanding how consumers think about farm animal welfare and the role it plays in purchasing decisions is key to engaging both consumers and producers in discussions about how to develop animal products that are affordable, safe, nutritious, sustainably produced, and humanely produced.

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