

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225577203>

Dealing with Ambivalence: Farmers' and Consumers' Perceptions of Animal Welfare in Livestock Breeding

Article in *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* · June 2002

DOI: 10.1023/A:1015012403331

CITATIONS

254

READS

1,411

3 authors, including:



Noelle Aarts

Radboud University

233 PUBLICATIONS 2,412 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The politics of space and place @ Wageningen University and Research [View project](#)



Coffee, Cameras and Climate Change: Seeing drought through the eyes of the farmer [View project](#)

DEALING WITH AMBIVALENCE: FARMERS' AND CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ANIMAL WELFARE IN LIVESTOCK BREEDING

(Accepted in revised form August 25, 2001)

ABSTRACT. The results of an empirical study into perceptions of the treatment of farm animals in the Netherlands are presented. A qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews with meat livestock farmers and consumers was chosen in order to assess motivations behind perceptions and to gain insight into the way people deal with possible discrepancies between their perceptions and their daily practices. Perceptions are analyzed with the help of a *frame of reference*, which consists of values, norms, convictions, interests, and knowledge.

The perceptions of the interviewed farmers are quite consistent and without exception positive: according to them, nothing is wrong with animal welfare in livestock breeding. The perceptions of the consumers we interviewed are more divergent, but generally negative. Both groups show ambivalence as a result of discrepancies between perceptions and behavior. Although the consumers share the impression that the living conditions of livestock animals are far from optimal, most of them still buy and eat meat from the meat industry. The farmers believe the welfare of their animals is good, but, as frequent defensive utterances show, they feel uncomfortable with expressed or unexpressed accusations of mistreating animals. The ways the respondents deal with this ambivalence were analysed by drawing on theories of *dissonance reduction* and *distancing devices*.

Catherine and Raphaël Larrère (Larrère and Larrère, 2000) argue that animal rearing is a hierarchical relationship whose rules are to be found in the fiction of a domestic contract. We argue that the question is not whether there should be a domestic contract, because such a contract seems already accepted. However, since values and norms differ widely, not only among meat livestock farmers and consumers, but also among consumers, the question remains as to whose values and norms should form the basis of the domestic contract.

KEY WORDS: ambivalence, animal welfare, frame of reference, perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

In the January 2000 edition of this journal, Catherine and Raphaël Larrère (2000) attempt to assess a proper way of treating domesticated animals. They argue that the two main theories that attempt to encompass animals in the scope of morality have proven to be insufficient. The first of these theories is based on the idea that if we assume that pleasure is a good, and suffering an evil, the domain of moral thinking must extend to all feeling



beings and to them alone (Bentham, 1983). The second theory turns to the concept of animal rights. Even if lacking reflexive thought, animals (at least some of them) have interests. And having interests suffices for having rights (which protect interests) (Goffi, 1994). In both theories, the Larrères argue, it is hard to determine which animals are to be seen as part of the moral world, and which are not. Another problem they address is that these two theories suggest egalitarianism, while the human-animal relations in animal rearing are hierarchical and non-egalitarian (Larrère and Larrère, 2000, pp. 51–59).

According to the Larrères, a beginning of a solution of the problem is to distinguish between an environmental ethic, which encompasses wildlife, and an animal ethic, which concerns domesticated animals. This distinction is a consequence of the anthropological assumption that humans have maintained social relations with animals since the Neolithic age (Midgley, 1984). In virtually all cultures, through time, animals have been part of the social sphere of humans (Harris, 1980, pp. 147–149). Likewise, it seems justified to argue that these domesticated animals take part in the system of rights and obligations of these societies. This means that farmers should give something in return for what they take from animals. The Larrères argue that animal rearing is a hierarchical relationship whose rules are to be found in the fiction of a domestic contract. Consequently they propose that a new conception of the ethics of the relation between men and livestock be constructed based on this idea of a domestic contract.

The argument of a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals, with its mutual obligations, stands strong. The proposed domestic contract has eliminated some problems. First, the distinction between wild and domesticated animals is quite convenient: as a result, the circle of moral concern has been confined drastically. Second, the hierarchical, non-egalitarian nature of the relations between men and animals is acknowledged.

However, there are several questions that directly arise from the more or less explicit assumptions that accompany the Larrères' domestic contract idea. For example, is the distinction between "wild" and "domesticated" animals always as clear as the Larrères suggest? This distinction depends on one's definition of domestication. How domesticated are the so-called Heck-cattle in Dutch nature conservation parks? How wild are the elephants in African national parks? How do we deal with the fact that pet cats turn wild as soon as they leave the house?

Besides, there is the question of the fictional aspect of the domestic contract. It reminds one of the contracts that the colonizers of North America imposed on native Indians, creating and acquiring land owner-

ship. The Larrères admit that a contract should be preceded by negotiations, and that it is certainly . . . “difficult to imagine an animal agreeing to a contract with a man” (Larrère and Larrère, 2000, p. 56). But they point out that, as in the case of the idea of a social contract between members of a political community, it involves an *implicit* contract, resting on the hypothesis that men and domesticated animals can communicate at a certain level.

Finally, questions arise from the statement that the domestic contract “. . . is not a pact between individuals, but a collective contract expressing the norms which rule the mixed community of men and their domesticated animals” (idem, 2000, p. 56). What then are the ruling norms in this “mixed community”? Do animals have norms? In the end, people decide what is an acceptable way of treating animals. For an assessment of the desirable contents of the contract, studying values and norms that people have towards the treatment of animals is needed.

In this article, the results of an empirical study into both farmers’ and consumers’ perceptions of the treatment of animals in Dutch intensive farming, will be discussed. As part of these perceptions, values and norms with regard to the treatment of animals will be analyzed. In the following paragraphs we will initially give an account of our analysis of perceptions. After that we will describe the ambivalence that proved to be the result from discrepancies between perceptions and behavior, and analyze the way people deal with this ambivalence. Finally, we will present the main conclusions of our study, and discuss the relevance of this research for the idea of a domestic contract as the basis for taking animals into moral concern.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHOD, LEADING CONCEPTS

The study into perceptions of the handling of farm animals is part of a research program called “Considerations surrounding livestock-breeding” of the Rathenau Institute in The Hague, the Netherlands (Rathenau Institute, 1999). The Rathenau Institute is an independent organization whose task it is to support social and political opinion forming on issues having to do with scientific and technological developments (Rathenau Institute, 1999). The goal of this research program is to provide information in order to initiate and to feed a society-wide discussion concerning the future of animal farming in the Netherlands. Apart from environmental concerns and concerns about food safety as a consequence of intensive farming, concerns about animal welfare in livestock breeding are repeatedly and

with increasing frequency expressed by groups in society. The central questions of our study were

- How do farmers and consumers perceive the treatment of animals in intensive animal husbandry?
- Can we find discrepancies between people's perceptions in these and their daily practices, and, if so, how do they deal with these discrepancies?

Our study started from the (theoretical) assumption that people construct perceptions according to their frames of reference (Kickert et al., 1997; Rein and Schön, 1986). Frames of reference are influenced by the following factors:

- Convictions (opinions about "the way things are," assumptions that are taken for granted)
- Values (opinions about the way things should be)
- Norms (the translations of these values into rules of conduct)
- Knowledge (constructed from experiences, facts, stories, and impressions)
- Interests (economic, social, and moral interests) (Te Velde et al., 2001).

People's perceptions are the result of an (unconscious) process of tuning these aspects of the frame of reference.

Research Methods

To gain insight into deeper motivations of people, a qualitative approach was chosen based on thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews. Since we were looking for patterns that explain (shifting) relationships between opinions, attitudes, and behaviors, we brought in as much variation in contexts as possible. The selected respondents were as different from each other as possible, and, at the same time, represented others as much as possible. In this way, we created the possibility for integrating varied data and theories that allows an acceptable extent of *theoretical sampling* (Silverman, 2001). We selected 15 consumers, widely differing in age, education level, size of the place of residence (big city versus countryside), ethnic backgrounds, and occupation (for instance a family doctor, a cleaning woman, a lecturer in psychology, a bricklayer, a furniture-maker, and a cook). The 15 livestock-breeding farmers who were interviewed consist of breeders of pigs, broiler chickens, and (meat) calves, whose farms widely differed in type and size (for instance varying from 800 to 11,000 pigs, and from 60,000 to 200,000 chickens), all working in a current (non-biological) farming-system.

The interviews were organized according to the method of “laddering” (Bernard, 1994; Van Rekom, 1995). The laddering interview starts probing for concrete concepts by asking respondents to make a choice between two concrete situations. Questioning the criteria respondents use follows this. Each answer a respondent gives is followed by a question like “why is this important to you?” until the respondent is unable to give further answers. In this way, the respondent activates, with the interviewer’s help, different aspects of his or her stock of knowledge. The outcomes of these interviews are patterns of interconnected convictions, values, norms, knowledge, and interests.

The interviews with consumers started with questions about buying and eating meat, not yet introducing the subject of the lives of farm animals and the conditions in which they live. A second set of questions concerned opinions about intensive livestock farming, first on a general level, later specifically about the living conditions of animals, and their welfare. Finally a set of questions was asked about the keeping of pets, in order to be able to compare opinions about pet keeping with opinions about farm animal rearing.

The interviews with farmers started with questions about daily practices, later focusing on animal welfare and values and norms concerning the treatment of animals. A second set of questions considered government policy on animal welfare and farmers’ thoughts about the opinions of consumers. Finally, farmers were asked questions about buying and eating meat, in order to be able to mirror their opinions with those of consumers.

3. FARMERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF ANIMAL WELFARE IN LIVESTOCK BREEDING

The farmers’ perceptions of the welfare of their livestock were questioned with questions such as: “What do you think of policy measures concerning animal welfare?” (Are these necessary?), and “What do you think of the accusations of animal welfare activists?” The stories that the farmers told in response to these and other questions contained information about the way they define animal welfare and judge the welfare of their animals.

Talking about animal welfare, it became clear that the interviewed farmers talk mainly about health, as illustrated in the following passage:

As long as my chickens grow well and look healthy, I suppose their welfare is OK.

From this point of view, the interviewed farmers perceive the way they treat their animals as positive, and they consider the welfare of their animals to be good.

The interviewed farmers' perceptions of animal husbandry correspond to each other in a high degree. Their perceptions seem to be based on a collective tradition with shared convictions, values, norms, and interests, and on knowledge that is derived from comparable rearing, schooling, and daily experience on the farm.

Values on which these perceptions are grounded are the following: animals should be treated well, and therefore they should be provided with enough food and drink; they should be provided shelter; they should be kept under hygienic conditions; and they should not be treated roughly. The *norms*, the concrete guidelines, in which these values are translated are embedded in a production philosophy that concentrates on fast growth and optimal food conversion. The interviewed farmers expressed norms in specialized terms that describe density of the livestock population, temperature control, hygiene, and type and quantity of food.

The values and norms are based on several *convictions* of the farmers about "the way things are," such as:

- animals are meant to serve humans,
- meat is a necessary element of the human diet,
- keeping animals and killing them for their meat is legitimate, and
- farmers are there to feed the rest of the human population.

The farmers' perceptions also correspond with their *interests*. The price they receive for their animals is directly related to the "number of kilograms" that are produced. But financial interest is not the only thing that counts. The stories of the interviewed farmers made clear that the following interests are just as important: surviving, supplying quality products, having a satisfying job, and recapturing legitimacy in society for the way they work, the so called "license to produce." Due to problems such as the manure surplus, mad cow disease, dioxin in chicken-food, swine fever, and, very recently, the foot and mouth epidemic, both products and ways of production of intensive farming have suffered severe criticism in the Netherlands. Now they feel in danger of losing their "license to produce," farmers realize how important this "license" is. Farmers remarked upon the feeling that somehow they are no longer wanted in the Netherlands, as one of them argued:

Sometimes it seems that they want to drive us out of the country.

With remarks of this kind farmers refer to more and more stringent regulations concerning environment and animal welfare. In the last ten years, thousands of Dutch farmers have quit farming or emigrated.

Due to the need for investments that will not be paid back immediately, changes in farming to the benefit of more animal welfare can pose a threat

to continuity. For pig farmers and broiler chicken farmers, it can even threaten the existence of their companies, since they are currently struggling to survive anyway. Supplying quality products, doing a satisfactory job, and a license to produce are linked with each other. Talking about quality, the interviewed farmers refer to good taste, freshness, and the right color of the meat. None of the interviewed farmers mentions animal welfare in this respect.

Doing a satisfactory job is linked to the maintenance of a certain level of comfort that has been reached in the past thirty years. Farmers have the impression that giving more consideration to animal welfare will imply returning to more traditional ways of farming. They fear that this will worsen working conditions.

Due to the above described convictions, values, norms, and interests farmers are not internally motivated to actively search for more *knowledge* about animal welfare. The interviewed farmers were asked whether they ever considered changing their system of farming into one of the alternative systems. Only one of them had considered this, because his business could not survive in the current system. However, he decided not to change the system because he supposed the regulations in alternative farming to be as complicated as in “current” farming. In order to create additional income, he and his wife started a camping site.

The interviewed farmers know what the policy measures with respect to animal welfare are, and what they will be in the near future. They also know how their cattle will grow fast and big, things they relate to animal welfare. However, they do not know very much about possible other aspects of animal welfare, for example, being able to display natural behavior, nor do they show much interest in alternative ways of farming with special attention for animal welfare. Instead they refer to alternative farming by describing bugbears such as “*little piglets, dying from cold,*” “*chickens eating each other,*” and “*the spread of diseases due to bad hygiene as a result of using straw.*” Here we recognize the mechanism of stereotyping: in order to create distance the image of “they” (alternative farming systems) is modeled to the worst examples (Elias and Scotson, 1965).

4. CONSUMERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF ANIMAL WELFARE IN LIVESTOCK BREEDING

The perceptions of the interviewed consumers are more divergent than those of the interviewed farmers. Depending on differences in habitat, cultural backgrounds, amount and nature of encounters with farming (i.e.,

different frames of reference), the perceptions differ especially in the clarity of the account that people give of the way animals in intensive animal husbandry are treated. However, in all these variations, several striking similarities protrude.

In contrast with the farmers, all consumers had a negative perception of the life of meat livestock. They pictured a short and miserable life, with a lack of space, fresh air, and light. They subscribed to the *values*, mentioned by the farmers (physical health, enough food, sufficient heating, and protection), but they strongly emphasized two additive values: freedom to move and freedom to fulfill natural desires:

The pigs don't have much space. I saw that once. They are with four or five in little racks. You can't say they have freedom to move.

and:

As soon as a piglet is born they take it away from its mother, I believe. They put it together with other piglets in a very small space.

Remarkably, the value of integrity of the body, which is stressed by organizations such as the Dutch Association of Animal Protection, was not mentioned by any of the consumers.

As to the *norms* in which these values are to be translated, most consumers remained vague. They mentioned things like "more space" and "the ability to go outside." For specific animals, more specific norms were mentioned, for instance, pigs should have the possibility to root and chickens should be able to grub.

The vagueness of the norms that the consumers came up with can be ascribed to a lack of concrete *knowledge* of the circumstances in which meat livestock lives. What they do know is based on fortuities: an incidental visit to a farm, stories they heard or documentaries they saw on television.

The values and norms of consumers seem to be based on the same *convictions* as those of farmers: animals are meant to serve humans ("*pigs are less important than people are*"), meat is a necessary element of the human diet ("*When I have dinner without meat it feels as if I have had not really eaten*"), keeping animals and killing them for meat is legitimate ("*these cows and pigs exist to produce meat*"), and farmers are there to feed the rest of the population ("*these people just do their work*").

The consumers' perceptions are just as much related to their *interests* as those of farmers. In the statements of consumers, we found interests such as: healthy, tasteful, and cheap meat that is easily available (preferably in the supermarket), and a clean conscience. The need for a clean conscience

is comparable to the wish for a license to produce. At the core of these needs lies the need for justification and reducing feelings of guilt.

5. DEALING WITH AMBIVALENCE

An indication of the difference between the perceptions of farmers and consumers is the difference in their definitions of animal welfare. As we stated before, the interviewed farmers directly relate animal welfare to physical health. If an animal eats well, it will grow fast, and this means that it is healthy. According to the interviewed farmers, this implies its welfare to be good. Consumers' definitions of animal welfare are broader: they presume that, beside physical well-being, a certain kind of mental well-being is very important as well; animals have to *feel* good. For the farmers, their definition actually supports the way they keep animals. It seems convenient for them to reduce animal welfare to health, since this will help them to keep away possible feelings of guilt. If, for example, animal welfare should include all kinds of natural behavior aspects, the farmers would face a problem.

Reducing animal welfare to the issue of health can be pictured as an effective strategy to reduce farmers' ambivalent feelings about the way in which they treat their animals. This ambivalence was latently present in the accounts of the farmers. For example, making up their minds about animal welfare, the farmers showed a defensive attitude by frequently comparing the way they treat their cattle to carefully selected examples, such as:

At least my calves have a better life than calves have in free nature, because in free nature, life is very hard. Out there it is about eating and being eaten.

At least my pigs are better off than pigs in biological farms. In winter those biological pigs die from the cold.

They say I should not keep more than six chickens per square metre. At the same time they put many, many people in a little flat. And these people often have two big dogs that are locked up all day. Is that animal welfare?

Remarks of these kind were made without questioning the way the farmers treat their animals.

Also the stories, comments, and utterances of the interviewed consumers show ambivalent attitudes with respect to animal welfare in intensive husbandry. On the one hand they argue: farmers will surely treat their animals well. On the other hand they worry about lack of space. Opposite judgments, such as "you shouldn't compare animals with people" and "the way animals are treated is inhuman" were frequently made by one and the same person. Ambivalence is also expressed in the discrepancy

between what people say and what they do. They say they do not agree with the way animals are treated in intensive farming, but they continue buying the meat.

The ambivalence of farmers and consumers originates in the tension between a “standard story” that justifies livestock farming and meat eating, and doubts about the moral validity of that story. The standard story consists of the convictions and values of people, in which norms are embedded. The doubts of consumers arise from negative stories in the media; farmers start doubting as a result of continuing accusations from the side of animal rights activists and, again, the negative tenor of media coverage.

Coping Strategies

Serpell (1986) has stated that people, when using animals for certain purposes (milk, meat, and affection) always experience feelings of guilt as part of the man/animal relationship. This statement links up with the anthropological theory of the universal principle of reciprocity (Mauss, 1970). If we take something from other people or from nature, we feel like giving a service in return: guilt has to be paid off, or to put it in a different perspective, power relationships have to be balanced (Serpell, 1986; Thomas, 1984). Institutionalized rituals, such as Islamic slaughter rituals can be viewed in this respect. Both farmers and consumers do not have clear rituals here, nor do their ambivalent feelings result in a change of behavior: consumers could stop eating meat, farmers could choose a different way of raising meat livestock. People have different ways of dealing with ambivalence. In social psychology, these are called *coping strategies*. By expressing such strategies, the respondents showed their ambivalence with regard to the treatment of animals in livestock breeding.

In the accounts of the respondents, we distinguished two kinds of coping strategies: *dissonance reduction* and *distancing devices*. Festinger (1964) distinguishes four ways of dissonance reduction. All of these we found both in the interviews with farmers as well as consumers:

1. Adding consonants to behavior

“*The pigpens are nice and warm.*”

“*The chickens always have enough to eat.*”

“*The calves will get a hug now and then.*”

2. Eliminating dissonance

“*A broiler chicken never sees daylight, but it doesn’t know what it misses.*”

“*Maybe they enjoy the company of each other.*”

3. Amplifying consonants

"It is more important for meat calves that they are sheltered than that they can go outside."

"It is very important for me to eat meat."

4. Trivializing dissonance

"They don't have much room while on transport, but it's only for a while, isn't it?"

Although farmers and consumers apply the same strategies of dissonance reduction, there are differences in the way the farmers and consumers cope with ambivalence towards the way farm animals are treated. To illustrate this, we borrow a concept from James Serpell (1986), who has identified four distancing devices: (1) detachment, (2) shifting responsibility, (3) concealment, and (4) misrepresentation (Serpell, 1986). In the following we will show that farmers and consumers apply the distancing devices in varying ways, according to the contexts in which they operate.

Detachment

Farmers interact with their animals on a daily basis. The physical distance between them and their animals is very small. On the other hand, the emotional distance between farmers and animals is great. Meat livestock farmers cannot afford to become too attached to their animals because seeing the animals leave the farm would hurt too much. An interviewed pig farmer's wife, formerly a nurse, told that when she and her husband started keeping pigs, she could not stand the loading of the pigs on the trucks when they were ready for slaughter. One day, when her husband found her crying in the kitchen again, he said: "This has to be the last time I find you sobbing like this. One more time, and we'll quit pig farming." The pig farmer forced his wife not to mourn for the deported pigs.

In large scale, intensified animal farming, the emotional detachment from animals is eased by the namelessness of the production animals. Calves and pigs are numbered; broiler chickens are counted in kilograms per square meter. The increasing of the scale of production has led to a commoditization (On commoditization versus singularization, see Appadurai, 1986) of animals. In terms of the theory of the domestic contract, one might say that to these animals are denied membership of the mixed community. Therefore they can be seen as placed outside the moral circle of farmers.

In contrast to the farmers' relationship with their animals, the emotional distance between consumers and farm animals appears to be small. This can be deduced from the way people react when they are, sporadically, confronted with the living conditions of meat livestock. As said above,

consumers' perceptions of animal well being in intensive farming is negative. In recent years, reports in the media about disasters in animal husbandry have dominated. Images of dead pigs (as a result of a widespread swine fever epidemic in the Netherlands) being loaded on trucks, mad cows, and stories about piglets being castrated: these flashes of information make them suspect the worst. Some people react angrily, others accept the – in their views – bad conditions of life for livestock. But nearly all the interviewed consumers expressed some sort of guilt towards farm animals. Maybe this is because they, unlike farmers, have not been forced to detach themselves emotionally. On the scarce moments on which they are forced to think about farm animals, they might apply the same norms to farm animals as to their own pets. However, we do not want to suggest the stories of the interviewed consumers to be consistent: one of them regarded the way pigs are housed as “terrible,” as, at the same time, she considered the keeping of a parakeet in a cage as perfectly normal.

Shifting Responsibility

Another distancing device that was evidently present in the respondents' stories is shifting responsibility. Farmers point at consumers (“*if they are willing to pay more, we will be happy to deliver animal welfare*”), or to the retailers (“*we will be happy to stop castrating pigs tomorrow, if only the slaughterhouses change their demands*”).

Consumers also shift responsibility for animal welfare. They point at the government (“*the government should design sufficient and effective laws with respect to animal welfare*”), and to retailers (“*they should offer meat that is produced in an ‘animal friendly’ way*”). It is notable that most of the interviewed consumers did not blame the farmers for the assumed bad living conditions of animals, they see farmers above all as “victims of the system.”

Concealment

Concealment, the third distancing device, is a fundamental characteristic of animal rearing and meat production. It protects consumers from having to detach themselves, as it is a detachment in itself.

As stated before, the distance between farmers and their animals is physically small and emotionally great. In the case of the interviewed consumers, things are the other way around. One of the interviewed consumers, who lives in the area of the Netherlands that is most densely populated with pigs, declared that she had never seen the inside of a pig-barn. Others had paid an incidental visit to farms. Usually these visits are limited to dairy farms, which are comparatively less intensive. A few

interviewed consumers grew up on a farm, but they said that they had lost touch with livestock farming and had no idea about the way meat livestock live nowadays.

Consumers do not see pigs, meat calves, and broiler chickens and are not reminded of their existence when the meat is on their plates, because in recent centuries the animal shape has gradually been removed from the Western European dining table (Elias, 1978). In most butcher shops, carcasses are no longer visible. As a result, many consumers nowadays prefer not to be reminded of the origin of the meat they eat, as the following quotation of one of the interviewed consumers perfectly illustrates:

I prefer chicken fillet because that doesn't remind me of a living animal.

Misrepresentation

Closely linked to concealment is the fourth distancing device, applied by farmers and retailers: *misrepresentation*. For instance, during an open day, farmers only show the nice side of animal farming. Another example of misrepresentation can be found on packages of milk, meat, and eggs, decorated with smiling pigs and happy chickens in a meadow. And what about “*la vache quirit*”?

Consumers as well as farmers benefit from concealment and misrepresentation. Consumers can stay uninformed and thereby, at least temporarily, escape ambivalence. In return, farmers can go on with their business, without being disturbed by unpleasant questions. When, incidentally, a consumer is confronted with the living conditions of farm animals, or a farmer is confronted with accusations by animal rights activists, they rapidly reduce ambivalence (or, in other words, dissonance) by, consciously or unconsciously, detaching themselves, and/or shifting responsibility.

Moral Circles

In an attempt to explain the feeling of guilt towards farm animals, we return at the historic occurrence of social relations between humans and animals. This in itself does not offer an explanation. However, a change in the way people in industrialized countries socialize animals does, i.e., the rise of pet keeping (Serpell, 1986). Compared with meat livestock, pets are on the opposite side of the scale from commoditization to personalization. This indicates that within the moral circle that encompasses animals, different moral standards for different animal species exist.

A useful model for ordering and understanding the variation in moral standards towards animals (and people) is offered by the concentric system

of moral circles of Wenz (1988). Wenz states that people have several moral circles, instead of one. A person can have his family positioned in the closest moral circle, friends in the same circle or a bit further away, strangers still further away, and so on. Likewise, animals are positioned in this system. Pets can be placed in the same circle as family, further away, or sometimes even closer. This depends on the function they have in a person's life. Farm animals are usually put in a circle at a far greater distance than pets, and wild animals even further. With the help of the concept of moral circles, we can clarify the case of an interviewed farmer of broiler chickens who paid seven life-saving operations for his dog, and at the same time can live with the fact that approximately five percent of his chickens die before the age of six weeks. The interviewed consumers showed the same way of putting different animals in different moral circles as illustrated by the woman with the pet parakeet that eats chicken. They use diverse criteria for this. One of the consumers said he felt pity for a lobster that is cooked alive, because "*it is such a beautiful animal.*" He said he did not feel pity for chickens, because he considered them to be "*stupid animals.*" Besides beauty and supposed intelligence, we also found size and ability to communicate with humans as criteria that are applied quite arbitrarily.

From the variation in the standards that people apply we can conclude that the distinction between animals placed within the moral circle (domestic animals) and animals that are placed outside of it (wild animals) is bipolar and too simple to account for the variation in reality. It will prove to be hard to determine what are the ruling norms according to the treatment of farm animals, because the mixed community of humans and animals of which the Larrères speak (Larrère and Larrère, 2000), is not uniform and coherent, but layered, and fragmented. Society consists of a variety of spaces, in which different values and norms are applied by different people to different animals.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on the results of our study concerning the way farmers and consumers perceive the treatment of animals in intensive animal husbandry, we will now present the main conclusions that might stimulate the necessary debate among different stakeholders (including scientists!), in order to develop policies in this respect.

Perceptions of Animal Welfare Reflect Contexts

Perceptions of animal welfare differ amongst livestock farmers. However, our study indicates that their perceptions are more similar to one another than those of the consumers we interviewed. Due to differences in knowledge about livestock farming, as well as differences in interests, values, and norms, consumers' perceptions of animal welfare differ reasonably. This conclusion implies that it is not useful to refer to "the consumer," as often is the case ("the consumer wants . . ."), since there are many types of consumers. Besides these different consumers adopt different identities in different situations (see also conclusion 2).

Both livestock farmers and consumers seem to be characterized by ambivalent feelings towards the way animals in intensive livestock farming are treated

The discrepancy between values, norms, and reality lead to ambivalent feelings or, in other words, to feelings of guilt. However, people prove to be very creative in dealing with this. The study shows that the interviewed farmers and consumers solve uncomfortable feelings with the help of coping strategies, such as dissonance reduction and distancing devices. This conclusion justifies the statement that the fact that consumers tend to buy the cheapest meat does not automatically mean that they are not interested in animal welfare. In other words, their buying behavior does not simply reflect their attitude towards the way animals in intensive farming are treated.

Collective Non-responsibility and Functional Ignorance

As a result of using coping strategies such as detachment, shifting responsibilities, concealment, and misrepresentation, a tacit pact of *collective non-responsibility* is maintained by both consumers and farmers and probably by the whole meat-sector and the government as well. This pact is further supported by a *functional ignorance*. Neither livestock farmers nor consumers are actively searching for information concerning animal welfare. Both parties seem to be better off knowing not too much. Livestock farmers need "the consumer" to refer to, in order to justify their daily practices. More nuanced information about consumers' perceptions, or about the capability of animals to suffer, would bring them into trouble, since this would deprive them of their arguments. Consumers do not seek to know more about the lives of the animals they eat. This information would seriously embarrass most of them. In general, people do not like to accept problems if they do not have clear ideas about possible solutions. In

such situations, they tend to avoid detailed information about the problem. The phenomenon of “functional ignorance” puts the effectiveness of large-scaled communication programs into perspective.

Returning to the proposal of the Larrères (Larrère and Larrère, 2000. See also the introduction of this article), we want to argue that there is no question about the existence of a domestic contract. The contract is less fictional than it seems. Considering the values and norms farmers and consumers have, we can ascertain that they agree that humans have certain obligations towards farm animals. However, they disagree about the nature of these obligations. According to us, the question therefore is not: is there a domestic contract? Instead it should be: on the basis of *whose* values and norms should the contract be formulated? There are various ways to make this assessment. More research into values and norms of different groups in society (for instance animal rights activists, butchers, and vegetarians) is necessary. Inconsistencies and ambivalence should be made negotiable. A public debate could enhance the development of norms about what is acceptable and what is not. One thing seems to be clear: the silent pact should be broken down.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986).
- Bernard, H. R., *Research Methods in Anthropology. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, 1994).
- Bentham, J., “An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,” in F. Rosen and J. H. Burns (eds.), *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983).
- Elias, N. and J. L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (Frank Cass and Co., London, 1965).
- Elias, N., *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 1: *The History of Manners* (Urizen Books, New York and Blackwell, Oxford, 1978).
- Festinger, L., *Conflict, Decision and Dissonance* (Stanford [s.n.], 1964).
- Goffi, Y., *Le philosophe et ses animaux* (J. Chambon, Nîmes, 1994).
- Harris, M., *Culture, People, Nature; An Introduction to general Anthropology* (Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1980).
- Kickert, W. J. M., E. J. Klijn, and J. F. M. Koppenjan (eds.), *Managing Complex Networks. Strategies for the Public Sector* (Sage Publications, London, 1997).
- Larrère, C. and R. Larrère, “Animal Rearing as a Domestic Contract?” *Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Ethics* 12(1) (2000), 51–58.
- Mauss, M., *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1st ed. 1925) (Routledge, London, 1970).
- Midgley, M., *Animals and Why They Matter* (University of Georgia Press, 1984).

- Rathenau Institute, *Van micro-elektronica naar mega-ICT (From micro-electronics to mega-ICT)* (Rathenau Institute, Den Haag, jaarverslag 1999).
- Rein, M. and D. A. Schön, "Frame-Reflective Policy Discourse," *Beleidsanalyse* 15(4) (1986), 4–18.
- Rekom, J., van, *Corporate Identity; Development of the Concept and a Measurement Instrument* (Erasmus Universiteit, dissertatie, Rotterdam, 1995).
- Serpell, J., *In the Company of Animals. A Study of the Human-Animal Relationships* (Blackwell, London, 1986).
- Silverman, J., *Interpreting Qualitative Data. Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (Sage Publications, London, 2001).
- Te Velde, H. M., M. N. C. Aarts, and C. M. J. van Woerkum, "Eten maar niet willen weten; veehouders en consumenten over de omgang met dieren in de veehouderij," in H. M. Te Velde, M. N. C. Aarts, C. M. J. van Woerkum, C. Hanning, and G. C. J. Smink (eds.), *Hoe oordelen we over de veehouderij? (What Do We Think of Livestock Farming?)* (Rathenau Institute, Den Haag, 2001).
- Wenz, P. S., *Environmental Justice* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988).

Social Science: Communication and Innovation Studies
Wageningen University
Hollandseweg 1
6706 KN
Wageningen
The Netherlands
E-mail: noelle.aarts@alg.vlk.wau.nl

