

Environment Affects Mood Of Pigs, Researchers Claim

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Researchers from the Newcastle University School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development have published research that they claim shows that a pig's emotion and level of contentment are directly connected to the quality of their living conditions.

Lead researcher Dr. Catherine Douglas and her colleagues "have shown for the first time that a pig's mood mirrors how content he is, highlighting that pigs are capable of complex emotions which are directly influenced by their living conditions," according to a press release dated July 27.

According to the press release, the scientists were able to find a way to essentially ask pigs whether or not they were optimistic or pessimistic about their life, based on their habitat. First, they taught the pigs to associate a note from a glockenspiel with a positive experience (receiving a treat) and a dog-training clicker with a negative one (the rustling of a plastic bag).

"The next step was to place half the pigs in an enriched environment--more space, freedom to roam in straw and play with 'pig' toys--while the other half were placed in a smaller, boring environment--no straw and only one non-interactive toy," the press release says. "The team then played an ambiguous noise--a squeak--and studied how the pigs responded."

The results were overwhelmingly clear, according to Dr. Douglas.

"We found that almost without exception, the pigs in the enriched environment were optimistic about what this new noise could mean and approached expecting to get the treat," she said. "In contrast, the pigs in the boring environment were pessimistic about this new strange noise and, fearing it might be the mildly unpleasant plastic bag, did not approach for a treat."

The results, she says, mirror those often found in humans.

"For example, if you're having a bad day--feeling stressed and low--and you're presented with an ambiguous cue such as your boss calling you into their office, the first thing that goes through your head is what have I done wrong?," Dr. Douglas says. "But on a good day you greet the same ambiguous event far more positively, you might strut in expecting a slap on the back and a pay rise."

"This 'glass half empty versus glass half full' interpretation of life reflects our complex emotional states, and our study shows that we can get the same information from pigs. We can use this technique to finally answer important questions about animal welfare in relation to a range of farm environments, for pigs and potentially other farm animals," she adds.

The research was sponsored by the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW), and was presented in June as part of the organization's annual conference in York.