

Food and Animal Welfare

H Buller and E Roe (2018). Published by Bloomsbury Academic, 50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK. 232 pages Paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8578-5707-1)/Hardback (ISBN: 978-0-8578-5578-7). Price £23.39/£67.50.

Animal welfare, and particularly poor animal welfare, is a product of how humans treat animals, and this is nowhere more evident than in the case of animals farmed for human consumption. In writing about animal welfare, many books have considered the wants and needs of animals, their evolved preferences and adaptations, and how the impact of different husbandry practices can be assessed in terms of biological processing and scientific evidence, of behavioural responses, physiological outcomes and other means of assessing suffering and coping. What is less common is an investigation of the different ways in which humans impact upon animal welfare and how we view animals, especially those animals that we eat. This book steps clearly into this arena, to describe and categorise our different roles and responsibilities in the raising of animals as food and charting the changing nature of our thinking and responses towards animals in this context. This is a book written by researchers interested in the society and behaviour of humans, rather than being more focused on the farmed animal as is more common in animal welfare literature. It is an academic discourse on how we view animals, and our varied interactions and intersections with animals, spanning the care and killing of animals, the development of animal welfare as a scientific discipline and the marketing of animal welfare as a trait of food of animal origin.

As is made clear by the title of the book, the focus is on farmed animals, or food animals, and it is the consumption of animals, their “edibility” as the book calls it, that impacts on the way we take care of them and, more recently, how we have distanced ourselves from thinking of the animal when buying and consuming food from animals. The first chapter makes the case for the importance of developing a social science perspective on animal welfare, just as animal welfare science has evolved over the last 50 years or so as a distinct interdisciplinary field. This opening section explores the different social science perspectives on animals as food and animal care, the “entanglements” of human-animal relationships and ethical thinking around animal management for food. Chapter 2 details the history of animal welfare thinking, focusing on developments in the UK, Europe and North America, in our responsibility to food animals. This covers the history of increasing sensitisation to animal welfare, the growth of empirical biological studies to address animal welfare issues and to develop improvements in animal husbandry, as well as the role of economics in animal welfare. To those familiar with animal welfare science this will be well-known territory for the most part, but it is, as with the whole book, delivered from a perspective of the human and societal engagement with developments, which can bring some fresh insights.

The nature of our varying relationships with animals is then considered in chapters exploring the different ways that humans impact on food animals. Chapter 3 considers the care and husbandry of food animals, using qualitative studies of observations of animal care conducted by Emma Roe. This covers the nature of the relationships of animal care-givers and animals, and the types of practices that they may be required to implement. In particular, the chapter also covers the killing of animals — not just killing for consumption, but also on-farm euthanasia of sick or injured animals, and the euthanasia of healthy but unwanted animals, and the responses, feelings and opinions of those engaged in these practices. Chapter 4 then considers the different approaches to engaging the consumer with animal welfare, through food labelling, assurance and marketing of animal welfare attributes. Chapters 5 and 6 address the expansion of Western European thinking on animal welfare practices, firstly in Eastern Europe (Hungary) and then further east to consider China. Finally, the book ends with a look to the future in terms of what may become of our relationships with the animals we eat.

The strength of this book is in its focus on the humans engaging in interactions with animals, either directly or through their research or consumption of animal products. Although similar studies have focused on the animal, in this book we learn more about the human perspective, focusing specifically on the qualitative aspect of providing care to animals in different contexts. In chapter 3, care-giving is explored through the perspective of different care-givers — the vaccinator of chicks, the worker responsible for the euthanasia of deformed or low viability chicks and the cattle handler. Each of these workers is contributing to the healthcare of the animal in some way, and their views on their own activities are explored. The methods and ethnographic approaches used can seem unusual to those more familiar with quantitative studies and animal science, focusing on a detailed account of the opinions of a relatively small number of actors, for instance. However, the narrative approach is interesting and reveals a different view of care-giving to animals, than is often described by other techniques. Of particular interest are views on trust and communication with animals, and how this is important to ensure that animals are well cared for. It would be interesting to pair these observations with the behaviour of the animals on the other side of the interaction, to gauge if this same level of trust or inter-species communication is still evident or reflects an entirely anthropocentric view of the relationship. For example, a suggested theme of care-giving is that “animal and human work together to produce food for humans, achieved through numerous practical tasks where both human and animal show care for each other’s well-being, each other’s needs and potential fragilities”. This is an interesting idea, but one that may be questionable, or even uncomfortable, when viewed from the animals’ perspective.

Animal welfare can clearly be affected by those responsible for providing day-to-day care to animals, their empathy, observation skills and ability to meet animal needs. However, another layer of responsibility also lies with the consumers of animal products as expressed through their buying behaviour. The book explores the different ways in which animal welfare can be commodified and marketed, and the competition that can develop between different retailers to provide products within the higher welfare markets. An important component of the marketing of animal welfare is an inspection to provide assurance that the claims made about welfare are justified by actual improvements in the lives of animals within the systems. The book explores how these inspections take place, at the level of the interactions between assessors and farmers, and the opinion of the assessors of the nature of inspections, and more widely at how these influence human relationships with animals. Marketing welfare can be challenging, and the moves in animal welfare science away from input- or resource-based measures (space, environment or feed type measures, for example) to outcome-based measures (at the level of the animals, so incidences of lameness, thinness or frequency of behaviour, for example) can compound this. Whereas claims such as 'pasture-raised', 'free-range' or 'outdoor-bred' have immediate and positive associations for many consumers who want to buy high welfare products, claims based on a lower frequency of lameness, or that animals are less likely to have a particular procedure (such as tail-docking) are not easily translated to an increasingly urban consumer with little knowledge of farming practices. The book provides an interesting exploration of the impact that labelling and welfare assurance has had in influencing the consumer and the difficulties of providing assurance in a framework that will simultaneously improve the real lives of animals on-farm, and engage consumers to buy those products.

The sections on globalisation of animal welfare, through case studies in Hungary and China, are insightful views of how animal welfare may be exported from the EU, through the requirements that new countries, such as Hungary, meet EU welfare standards. Additionally, the approaches to improving farm animal welfare in China

have been largely by international animal welfare non-governmental organisations, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, World Animal Protection and Compassion in World Farming. Unlike the changes that have happened in the UK and EU, where often the wishes of society to improve farm animal welfare, and thus the presence of a market for higher welfare foods, are drivers for change, in these studies it is outside pressures. A common feature described in these ethnographic studies is that the consumers and farmers in these countries are often unaware of or not very interested in animal welfare in their buying, focusing much more on local production, improved productivity and food safety. The authors have been involved at the point where animal welfare, quality of animal lives, and animal sentience as concepts are in their infancy in these countries, and provide an account of how other levers or influences might be required to change welfare or perceptions of what is good practice in farming. In both case study countries these are rapidly evolving, but the qualitative approaches are interesting to document different views of animals, and how improved welfare may occur.

In many ways this is a fascinating study of human-animal interactions, from a social science perspective of animal welfare. There are, however, areas in the book, most notably parts of Chapter 1, which can be fairly heavy going for those not versed in the language, terminology and approaches used in social geography or other social sciences. At points this can seem almost impenetrable and might be off-putting to those coming from a different perspective. It is worth persisting though even if the theory and language is of less interest, skipping ahead to other more readable chapters. The sections that are written in a more narrative style are considerably more engaging, and an interesting exploration of humans and their interactions with animals which will provide food, documenting the multi-faceted ways in which we interact, consume or are responsible for the quality of the lives of food animals.

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