

An Exploration of Expert Opinion on Animal Welfare and Ethics

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

In 2015, the American Veterinary Medical Association released eight "Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics." The principles include treating animals with respect and compassion, and respecting the rights of colleagues, other health professionals, and clients. Although veterinarians take an oath to implement recommended principles in the profession, the general public may not always agree with these recommended welfare practices. For example, according to Pieper et al. (2016), consumer perceptions regarding hormone use in reproductive management should not be underestimated because this public perception may impact the viability of certain management practices for future industry use. Degeling and Johnson (2015) found the practice of animal welfare has shifted the focus from the science of animal production to the politics of consumption, and thus, public opinion has the potential to sway accepted management practices despite expert opinions. It is crucial to communicate knowledgeable expert opinions to those who potentially disagree from a less informed perspective. By better understanding expert opinion, effective communication strategies can be identified so knowledge can be shared in an effective manner and basic concerns can be addressed. The social exchange theory (SET) was used to guide this study. Lianf et al. (2008) described SET as a basis to understanding individual knowledge-sharing behavior. Experts should be able to communicate their area of knowledge to those with differing opinions and perspectives. SET, sharing knowledge can be seen as social interaction amongst those of both similar and different interests.

Purpose and Objectives

In an effort to better understand how to communicate between veterinarians and the general public, the purpose of this study was to obtain expert opinions on the topic of animal welfare and management ethics. In turn, we can identify the information to be shared with the public and formulate a plan to address inadequacies. Therefore, we investigated the following questions:

RQ1: What are the expert opinions regarding animal welfare and ethics?

RQ2: What needs are there for education and communication on animal welfare and ethics?

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted using six semi-structured interviews. According to Longhurst (2003), semi-structured interviews allow for complex behaviors, opinions, and emotions to be investigated. Recruitment emails were sent to the target population of veterinary science experts, including veterinarians, animal behavior and welfare professors, veterinary science professors, and a former veterinary technician. The research team created and reviewed an interview guide to ensure questions were relevant and applicable to research interests. Fourteen questions were postulated, with prompts and follow-up questions to help clarify answers. The interviews were scheduled via Zoom or in-person (45 to 60 minutes); all interviews were recorded and transcribed with Otter.ai. The questions were segmented into five areas: background and opinion, working with producers, human medicine and veterinary medicine and science, veterinary ethics, and education in veterinary medicine and science. To analyze the data open, axial, and selective coding were used to create emergent themes. An audit trail detailed definitions and theme formation for dependability and transferability (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Findings

We sought to understand the experts' opinion on animal welfare and ethics. The first theme that emerged was *Animal Rights are Different from Animal Welfare*. The public often misinterprets them for being the same. Participant 1 noted, "a lot of people get animal welfare confused with animal rights." Animal rights groups further blur the lines through influence on social media." Participant 2 stated, "as owners or caretakers of animals, animals do not have rights, but we as animal owners or caretakers are responsible for their health and welfare." The second emerging theme was *Animal Welfare Practices Should be Based on Science* as scientific practices ensure the safety and well-being of animals. Participant 4 stated, "perceived welfare in our industry should be based on science and not just your human feelings of what you think is better or not." The third theme was *Animal Welfare Practices Impact on Animal Health & Behavior* as it is a critical aspect of practicing animal welfare. Participant 5 stated, "to practice animal welfare, you have to know about animal behavior, not only about animal health... knowing how the normal behavior of the animals is and what is abnormal, recognizing this".

We evaluated the need for communication and education strategies. The first theme was *Experts are Concerned with Public Opinion*. The conversations indicated that both experts and consumers play a role in the communication block within the agriculture industry, Participant 1 noted, "it's the fact that the public doesn't understand or has lost touch with what happens in agriculture and science." Participant 6 said, "I think communication (is the problem)...we're realizing communication is an issue, but a lot of veterinarians have very poor communication skills." Secondly, *Experts Believed Communication is Key*. For example, participant 3 spoke about how experts need to be trained to communicate, "I think the issue is that while we're taught not to post those things (social media), we need to be educated on how to educate the public and teach them exactly how it does work and what we do."

Conclusions & Recommendations

To communicate with the public regarding ethical animal management practices, it was first necessary to understand how the experts perceive these topics. This study determined first, experts should attempt to define animal welfare and how to address the subject. According to experts in this study, animals do not have rights and it is up to the caretaker to ensure proper welfare using scientific practices rather than human feelings regarding care. To help educate others about the relevant science, SET can be applied as it focuses on the individual's behavior within the process of resource exchange (Yan et al., 2016). Individuals seek to exchange resources with others so they can receive knowledge through contact (Yan et al., 2016). To exchange knowledge from experts to the public, educators should train scientists in communication techniques so they are fully prepared to enter the workforce and are able to share knowledgeable information and perspectives from the experts based on current science and research in the field. With scientific communication training, veterinarians could become expert opinion leaders and routinely communicate animal welfare practices and ethics to the public. For example, veterinarians could be trained on how to communicate the importance of using antibiotics to heal animals, answering questions and concerns, revealing scientific studies as the basis for improved animal health and welfare. Future research should explore public perspectives of animal welfare and their trusted sources of information.

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