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A Critical Reflection on Methodological Traditions in the Assessment of Animal Welfare with Relevance to Tropical Livestock Agriculture

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Abstract

Although different approaches in the assessment of animal welfare are established, the appropriateness of methods is still under debate. The adoption of animal welfare concerns to developing countries raises further questions. In view of a suitable local and global decision-making in the area of animal welfare based on a sound scientific argumentation, it is regarded to be helpful to receive deeper insight in scientific principles. The aim of the study, therefore, is to critically reflect on methodological traditions in the assessment of animal welfare. Regarding the term of animal welfare it is stated that welfare of farm animals is orientated towards both the physical and mental well-being of animals. There is an agreement about animals' subjective experience as a reference for the assessment of animal welfare. In addition, it is widely accepted that the concept of animal welfare involves also value judgements. The scientific assessment of animal welfare is mainly concentrated on measurements in relation to animals' physiology and behaviour. Contemporary science is grounded on the methodological tradition of the 17th century French philosopher René Descartes. According to this philosophy, the scientific research process is characterized by a subject-object-dualism rather than following an integrative view. Scientific knowledge must be based on objective facts. Mental processes in animals, as they are identified in the concept of animal welfare, are *per definitionem* no matter of scientific investigation. The assessment of values creates a problem when using conventional scientific methods. Values fall in the realm of ethics. Animal ethics emphasises moral standards on the treatment of animals and establishes norms for human conduct. In Western tradition, the justification of these norms is based on general principles or theories which claim universal validity. Since the applicability of Western ethical standards to other cultures is doubted, the view of ethical relativism is considered more appropriate. The relativist position holds that ethical standards depend upon, or are relative to, an individual's historical, economical, geographic and cultural-religious background. It is concluded that prevailing research traditions offer limited access to some elements of the concept of animal welfare. Additional reflection is required in the context of animals' subjective experience and the ethic-value-complex.

Keywords: Animal welfare, assessment, ethics, methodology, tropical livestock agriculture