

## Conducting sensitive social science research about on-farm animal welfare incidents: challenges and approaches

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### Abstract

The social sciences can help provide a deeper understanding of human-farm animal relations. However, social science research exploring problematic human-farm animal interactions can be of a sensitive nature. Studies that carry risks for participants and the researcher are known methodologically as sensitive research. However, there is little discussion in the animal welfare sciences on how best to conduct research of this nature on animal owners, despite recommendations being made for more interdisciplinary collaboration between the animal welfare sciences and social sciences. Drawing on social science research conducted in 2012 on the human element of on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland, this short communication presents a case study of the sensitivities and challenges involved in carrying out social science research related to farm animal welfare. This communication details the steps involved in recruiting participants, the methodological challenges encountered, and the approaches used to overcome these challenges. Our experience suggests that when conducting socially sensitive research, careful consideration needs to be applied to the recruitment process, and the study design must aim to minimise the potential risks for all involved. Professionals in the field, such as veterinarians, can play an important role in outlining some of the implications involved, and in overcoming research challenges. Understanding the challenges to this form of research will help to maximise research potential.

**Keywords:** animal welfare, human-farm animal relations, participant recruitment, sensitive research, social science, the Republic of Ireland

### Introduction

There is growing recognition of the benefits of an interdisciplinary research approach in the animal welfare sciences. Collaboration with the social sciences can improve our understanding of the role of human behaviour and human-animal interactions in influencing animal welfare standards (Lund *et al* 2006; Carezzi & Verga 2009). However, social science research carried out by the authors, Devitt *et al* (2013, 2104, 2015) and others (Andrade & Anneberg 2014) points out that from a research perspective, investigations into problematic human-animal interactions on the farm are of a highly sensitive nature. Research “in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research” (Sieber & Stanley 1988), is known methodologically, as socially *sensitive* research, and includes topics such as mental health issues, experiences of abuse, violence, or death. Sensitive research can also include research about farmer behaviour that is not compliant with mandatory legal requirements (for an

example, see Bronner *et al* 2014). Challenges associated with this area of research include difficulties in recruiting participants, the potential for: i) emotional distress for participants as painful experiences are recalled; and ii) mistrust of the researcher and research objective, and concealment of perspectives and experiences by participants during data collection (McCosker *et al* 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al* 2008a). Difficulties including exhaustion and having to manage their own emotional response can also arise for the researcher when listening to research participants’ challenging or emotional stories, when commencing with data collection and when data collection is concluding, or when trying to manage the boundaries between the researcher and participant (Brannen 1988; Dickson-Swift *et al* 2007, 2008b). Consequently, researcher self-care is advised (Dickson-Swift *et al* 2007).

Despite these challenges, the value of an interdisciplinary approach is apparent in a number of studies investigating farmer-animal interactions (for example, Hemsworth *et al* 2000, 2010; Kielland *et al* 2010; Kauppinen *et al* 2012). As

**Table 1 Social science research conducted in the Republic of Ireland regarding on-farm animal welfare incidents.**

<b>Part A:</b> 'An investigation into the human element of on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland' (Devitt <i>et al</i> 2015)	
<b>Aim</b>	To identify and investigate the social and human-health related factors that underpin on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland, focusing on farmers
<b>Method</b>	Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with n = 13 farmers who had a recent incident of animal neglect on their farm
<b>Results</b>	Farming difficulties associated with age and lack of help on the farm, and mental-health-related problems impact negatively on farmers' ability to carry out everyday farm management activities, resulting in the compromise of farm animal welfare standards. Tolerated poor standards of animal welfare over a period of time, reflected farmers' perceptions of what constituted appropriate welfare. The recommendation was made for further research into how mental health problems may lead to altered or reduced regard for farm animal welfare
<b>Part B:</b> 'An investigation into the professional challenges from responding to on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland' (Devitt <i>et al</i> 2013, 2014)	
<b>Aim</b>	To identify the professional challenges faced by private and Government veterinary professionals when responding to farm animal welfare incidents that involve herd owner difficulties. To identify the barriers to forming a multi-agency response towards addressing problematic farmer-animal welfare relations
<b>Method</b>	Four focus groups conducted with Government veterinarians (n = 18) and three with private veterinarians (n = 12)
<b>Results</b>	Three types of professional dilemmas were identified: defining professional parameters, determining the appropriate response, and involvement versus detachment. Barriers to a multi-agency response included concerns over client confidentiality (by private veterinary practitioners) and professional confidence in how to respond appropriately, and inconsistent involvement from health and social support professionals. The recommendation was made to strengthen cross-reporting structures between Government and private veterinarians, and between veterinarians and social/health support services

yet, however, there has been little discussion about approaches to minimise these risks despite recommendations for more interdisciplinary work investigating animal welfare (Lund *et al* 2006; Andrade & Anneberg 2014). This short communication presents the processes and related challenges encountered when conducting sensitive exploratory social science research about the human element of on-farm animal welfare incidents in the Republic of Ireland (Devitt *et al* 2013, 2014, 2015). This communication details our attempts to overcome these challenges, and the areas of learning that emerged for the research team as a result. The communication provides some guidance for future research studies that aim to investigate farm animal neglect from a social science perspective.

### Conducting sensitive research into human-farm animal relations

The authors' research involved two main parts (Table 1). Part A was conducted in February, 2012, and was followed by Part B in April, 2012.

The main challenges related to: i) recruiting participants; and ii) ensuring participants' support and researcher self-care.

#### Recruitment challenges

The greatest challenge in the authors' research related to recruiting farmers and, unfortunately, a low response rate from the farmer group was attained. Two key recruitment challenges were encountered. The first recruitment challenge related to the need to adhere to strict legal obligations around data privacy and protection, and the second concerned ease of access to the farmer group.

#### Obligations of the researcher

Research ethical approval was granted by University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee. Farmers were randomly selected from the Agriculture Field Inspection and Test (AFIT) system, a confidential database held by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), which records all incidents of farm animal neglect reported in the Republic of Ireland. Eighty-two farmers were invited to participate. The AFIT database is not intended for research purposes. Consequently, the researcher had to follow strict data protection guidelines by seeking the consent of those listed on the database for their contact details to be used for research purposes. All contact and study material had to be administered from DAFM, with the assistance of Government veterinarians working directly on farm animal welfare. As part of this process, Letters of Information and Consent Forms were provided to Government veterinarians, who then proceeded to contact selected farmers, to seek their consent to allow for their contact details to be shared with the researcher. The researcher then proceeded to contact consenting farmers directly.

DAFM have an overall responsibility to protect animal welfare in the Republic of Ireland and, whilst funding this research, had to balance study objectives with its duty as the competent authority. Consequently, and in line with stipulated ethical requirements, farmers were informed through the Letter of Information that the researcher (a social scientist, who was not qualified to assess animal welfare on the farm) was obliged to notify DAFM, if they disclosed during interview that animal neglect was

ongoing at the time of interview. In some respects, this may have discouraged farmers from participating in the research. In attempting to overcome this challenge, the content of the Letter of Information was carefully worded so as not to make the farmer feel that they or their farm was under investigation by DAFM. In total, thirteen (15% of the sample) farmers participated. None of those who participated identified this requirement as a concern during interview, and no animal welfare problems were disclosed to the researcher.

Government veterinarians informed the research team that farmers may have been less willing to participate because of negative perceptions towards DAFM, and concern about the potentially sensitive and distressing nature of animal neglect as a topic of research. Consequently, invited farmers may also have formed negative or mistrusting perceptions of the study objectives. However, these procedures had to be followed in order to satisfy ethical requirements around data protection and the requirement placed on the researcher to report any disclosed incidents of animal neglect.

#### *Accessing participants*

Feedback from Government veterinarians involved directly in animal neglect incidents provided insight into the potential risks to farmers as a result of being invited to take part in the study and as a result of participation (for example, distress as a result of recalling emotional scenarios or stressful events), to the researcher (such as concerns over farmer approachability and co-operation), and to the relationship between the farmer and private veterinarian (for example, concerns pertaining to the need to maintain client confidentiality). Due to a low farmer response rate, it was decided to conduct focus groups with Government veterinarians and Private Veterinary Practitioners (PVPs) because of their experience with farm animal neglect (Table 1, Part B). Using a snowball technique, key veterinary contacts were identified to assist in PVP participant recruitment. This technique, which involves existing study participants identifying potential candidates for study participation, is particularly useful when recruiting from hard-to-reach populations (Marshall 1996; Atkinson & Flint 2001). PVP participation was limited, however, because of concerns about client confidentiality and the possible risks to the PVP-client relationship as a result of participation in the research. This was despite a clear emphasis by the researcher on the study objectives and a commitment to confidentiality throughout the research stages (Devitt *et al* 2013, 2014).

#### *Approach and learning*

In order to maximise recruitment potential, the team clearly emphasised the research objectives and the importance of consent, sensitivity, confidentiality and participant support in all study material and throughout data collection. Further, the research team were careful not to use language that may have been perceived by farmers as invasive or threatening, and the opportunity was provided to them to find out more about the project objectives prior to committing to participation.

Indeed, the response rate in our study could have been bolstered by the use of a number of different recruitment channels. Looking elsewhere, Andrade and Anneberg (2014) employed three approaches (in their study, seven farmers were interviewed; however, without knowing the actual number of farmers relevant to the topic, who were invited to participate, it is not possible to make conclusions on the effectiveness of their recruitment methods). One of these methods involved the publication of the study information letter on the internet, thus allowing interested farmers to contact the research team, without having to interact with Government officials.

Working with key personnel in the field (such as veterinarians and agricultural advisors) that have a positive, trusted relationship with potential participants can help the researcher identify and minimise some of the risks and challenges involved, and achieve a greater response rate (Atkinson & Flint 2001). For example, in their analysis of the social conditions of cases of animal neglect, Andrade and Anneberg (2014) recruited participants via key informants in two local farm organisations. Undoubtedly, it is worthwhile to consult with key personnel as early as possible in the research process. In our study, as outlined, Government veterinarians provided insight into the potential challenges in the field during efforts to recruit participants, rather than in the initial research design stage. Consultation with Government veterinarians earlier in the initial stages of the research might have proved beneficial in preparing them for participant recruitment and gaining their support and approval of the study. Government veterinarians advised that a workshop introducing the study, prior to participant recruitment, would have placed them in a more reassured position when assisting with farmer recruitment. This would have also provided the researchers with the opportunity to hear the concerns of those working directly with farmers on welfare issues.

#### **Researcher self-care and participant support**

Veterinary participants recalled involvement in some distressing (human and animal) experiences when responding to welfare cases that involved human problems, such as expression of suicidal tendency on the part of some farmers. These human experiences mirror findings from the research literature. For example, Cleary *et al* (2012) reported on suicidal tendencies among farmers in rural parts of the Republic of Ireland, while Morrissey *et al* (2009) found that farmers in the Republic of Ireland comprise a high proportion of psychiatric inpatient admissions in rural areas. In the present study, farmers who had a recent incident of animal neglect on their farm were recruited (Table 1, Part A). They were requested in interviews to talk about any personal difficulties that may have arisen and contributed to the incident taking place, which evoked emotive memories for some. They were also requested to recall the animal welfare incident itself (Devitt *et al* 2015). A number of these incidents were particularly severe from an animal welfare perspective, requiring the intervention of DAFM to bring about a resolution, and in some cases An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police).

## Approach and learning

In line with recommendations from Johnson and Clarke (2003) and Dickson-Swift *et al* (2008a,b), it was necessary to emphasise and ensure confidentiality throughout all stages of the research. During data collection, the researcher focused on establishing trust and showing empathy, while encouraging participants to speak openly. This also required, however, the ability of the researcher to detect signs of distress from participants, while acknowledging the participants' emotional response so as to encourage openness. Based on recommendations from the Human Research Ethics Committee, farmers were asked prior to interviewing if they had any specific needs that were required to be met as a result of their participation in the study (eg such as access to counselling support). A support person was in place during and following interviews, but was not used by any of the participants. In addition, the researcher was accompanied by another member of the research team when carrying out interviews in the farmers' homes. Though this was a requirement by the Ethics Committee, concern was also expressed by a small number of Government veterinarians working in the field, that some farmers might not be approachable, especially as the research study was associated with DAFM and hence, possibly contributing to a negative perception towards study participation. It should be noted that during data collection, the researcher did not encounter any difficulties approaching participants. Finally, the presence of a second member of the team at interviews, eased some of the burden experienced by the researcher, of listening to participants', at times, emotive stories.

## Conclusion

Social science research provides a useful approach to understanding complex animal welfare problems (Lund *et al* 2006; Devitt *et al* 2013, 2014, 2015). More research is required into the potential influence of poor mental health among farmers on their ability to carry out everyday farm management practices and on levels of empathy towards animal suffering (Devitt *et al* 2015). However, considering the sensitivity of the topics (ie mental illness, personal difficulties, animal neglect that has ethical and legal ramifications), protocols and procedures must be implemented to increase the recruitment potential of the research while minimising the risks involved for participants and the researcher. In agreement with McCosker *et al* (2011), Research Ethics Committees can serve as gatekeepers to ensure that adequate protocols are in place to protect the researcher and participants. The challenges encountered and approaches taken in our research support the contention that the study design must aim to minimise the potential risks for all involved and prevent the potential of negative effects for farmer-veterinarian relationships (if veterinarians or other farm-related professions are involved in participant recruitment). Undoubtedly, this may present challenges to recruiting participants, and thus, careful consideration needs to be applied to the recruitment process. Adherence to ethical guidelines, clear communication on study objectives, early involvement from professionals and farmer representative groups involved in the field (such as veterinarian groups), and a continual emphasis on trust and confidentiality, are all important features for consideration when designing sensitive research into human-animal interactions.

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