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Equine welfare in England and Wales: An exploration of stakeholders’ understanding through the use of in-depth interviews

Running title: Equine stakeholders’ understanding of welfare
Investigating how those responsible for the day to day care of animals understand the concept of animal welfare is an important step in the process of animal welfare improvement. For example, exploring how equine stakeholders talk about equine welfare may offer insight into how they interpret and utilise communications about welfare and how this may have an impact on the actual welfare of horses. In-depth interviews with 31 equine stakeholders in England and Wales were used to explore their perceptions and understanding of welfare. It was found that they understood the concept of welfare in four distinct ways. Firstly, welfare was understood in terms of the provision of resources, for example food and water. Secondly, a “horse-centred” understanding of welfare was articulated which included the horses’ mental state and linked to natural behaviour. Thirdly, the word welfare had negative connotations and for some good welfare was achieved through the avoidance of negative states. There was a tendency for interviewees to distance themselves from examples of “poor” welfare. Finally, interviewees discussed incidents that occurred in their own familiar contexts but suggested that these were not welfare problems or sought to justify or downplay them. There was little acknowledgement or reference to definitions of welfare as used by welfare scientists and incorporated into welfare legislation and codes of practice. There was evidence that the ways in which equine stakeholders understood the concept of welfare may have been acting as a barrier to the alleviation of some commonly occurring equine welfare problems. Consequently, there is a need for strategies aimed at improving equine welfare to consider stakeholder constructs of welfare and the ways in which these are generated and acted upon.

Keywords: defining welfare; equine stakeholder; horse; interview; qualitative
INTRODUCTION

The study of welfare as a scientific discipline can be traced back to the 1960s and has developed in parallel with increased public concern for animal welfare. As part of this development, welfare scientists have put forward a number of definitions of welfare offering insight into how the concept is understood by them. Historically welfare has been seen as a single dimensional concept of physiological functioning (for example, McGlone, 1993) or affective states (for example Duncan, 1993 or Spruijt, Van Den Bos & Pijlman, 2001). Fraser, Weary, Pajor & Milligan (1997) suggest that welfare is a multi-dimensional concept concerned with three interrelated components of basic health and functioning, affective state and natural living, and it is now largely accepted amongst welfare scientists that welfare encompasses all of these components. Using these understandings of welfare as a basis for research, welfare scientists have provided insight into the welfare needs of animals and risk factors for compromised welfare.

Estimates suggest that there are at least one million horses and ponies in Great Britain (Boden, Parkin, Yates, Mellor & Koa, 2012), the majority of which are kept for sport and leisure purposes (Boden, Parkin, Yates, Mellor & Koa, 2013). The growth of the equine industry has been coupled with increased concern that the welfare of many horses in Britain may be suboptimal (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Redwings, Blue Cross, World Horse Welfare, Horse World and British Horse Society (BHS), 2012 & 2013).

The welfare of all domesticated animals, including horses, is ultimately determined by those responsible for their day to day care and in recent years there has been growing acknowledgement that the study of individual and societal attitudes and behaviours
associated with animal welfare should be incorporated into animal welfare research. As Tuyttens, Vanhonacker, Van Poucke and Verbeke (2010) state, “A better understanding of [the] differences in opinion about what constitutes the concept of animal welfare may be beneficial for facilitating public debate and improving communication between [stakeholders]” (p. 112). As such, exploring equine stakeholder perceptions and attitudes in relation to equine welfare and welfare related practices may offer insight into the ways in which scientific and layperson knowledge about welfare is generated and transmitted and the possible implications for animal welfare. Further to this, Heleski and Anthony (2012) argue that stakeholder perceptions should both stimulate and inform ethical assessments of practices which impact on equine welfare.

A number of studies have explored equine stakeholder perceptions of the welfare of horses. Collins et al., (2010) investigated equine stakeholders’ perceptions of the consequences associated with potentially welfare compromising practices as a means of identifying welfare problems in Ireland. Albright, Mohammed, Heleski, Wickens and Houpt (2009) and Litva, Robinson and Archer (2010) explored owner perceptions and experiences of windsucking and/or crib-biting behaviour in horses. Both these papers discuss the welfare implications that these perceptions may have for horses exhibiting these behaviours. Visser and Van Wijk-Jansen (2012) investigated the way in which horse enthusiasts gather information about equine welfare, their emotional involvement with horses and their attitudes, knowledge and daily practices in relation to equine welfare to suggest ways in which welfare improving strategies may be targeted. However, Hemsworth, Jongman and Coleman (2015) point to an absence of substantive research into the relationship between horse owner attitudes and equine welfare.
The way in which those entrusted with the day to day care of animals understand the concept of welfare has implications for animal welfare and welfare improvement (Kauppinen, Vainio, Valdros, Rita & Vesala 2010). As such, exploring how equine stakeholders’ understand the term ‘equine welfare’, the welfare needs of horses and their perceptions of the current welfare status of horses may inform our understanding of the way in which horses are cared for. It may also facilitate the development of strategies to improve welfare by providing information about how and why equine welfare may be compromised, some of the barriers to, and possible means of improvement. Heleski and Anthony (2012) suggest that the ethical and moral positions held by those responsible for the day to day care of horses and the value stakeholders’ place on different types of welfare assessment, for example how much they value biological functioning, affective states, and considerations of naturalness, will impact on individual assessments of welfare related practices. In line with this, Visser and Van Wijk-Jansen (2012) explored Danish horse enthusiasts’ perceptions of the requirements important for ensuring welfare as a means of enhancing equine welfare through education. To date, no research has directly examined how British equine stakeholders perceive and understand the concept of equine welfare.

Welfare scientists are increasingly integrating methodological approaches used by social scientists such as in-depth interviews, into their research as a way of exploring human attitudes and behaviour in relation to animal welfare. Horseman, Roe, Huxley, Bell, Mason and Whay (2014) used in-depth interview techniques to explore the process of treating lame dairy cows from the farmers’ perspective whilst Roe, Buller and Bull (2011) carried out an ethnographic study of farm animal welfare assessment to explore farmer and assessor perceptions of the process. As Lund, Coleman, Gunnarsson, Appleby and Karkinen (2007) argue “Where human and animal interactions occur, […] the social sciences should be part of the collaborative effort” (p.47).
Through collaboration it has been possible to gain new insights into on-the-ground welfare challenges and their possible solutions, insights which have not always been possible through the use of traditional scientific and lab-based research techniques. For example, Horseman et al., (2014) found, through open discussions with farmers about lameness, that the language used by dairy farmers to talk about lameness revealed specific perceptions of lameness and the value they placed on prompt treatment. In-depth interviews lend themselves to exploring the subtleties of how stakeholders understand the concept of welfare and the language they use to discuss related issues and practices.

By employing a qualitative social science method, specifically in-depth interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), this paper aims to provide an analysis of how equine stakeholders articulate their understanding of equine welfare. In-depth interviews are particularly useful as foundation research where little is known about a subject area. Kauppinen et al., (2010) used in-depth interviews as a way of focusing subsequent research on the relevant issues surrounding farmers’ attitudes to improving animal welfare and they found that, by utilising in-depth interviews as a preliminary step, themes were disclosed which had not emerged from previous quantitative studies. As such in-depth interviews provide opportunities for new understandings of a topic to emerge and in the current study the authors aimed, through a line of open-questioning, to explore the range of perceptions of welfare held by interviewees without constraining the research with their own understandings.

The equine industry is diverse with horses and ponies being “employed” in a variety of activities. The ways in which people are involved in the equine industry is equally wide-ranging. As a reflection of the diversity of the equine industry, this research consulted a broad cross-section of equine stakeholders to explore the range of perceptions held.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods described below, including recruitment approaches, the process for gaining consent and the interviews were all carried out in accordance with University of Bristol ethical approval guidance and ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of Bristol’s ethics committee before commencement.

Recruitment and contact

Participants were recruited across a range of activities in which horses are involved. Using population data reported by Boden et al., (2013) a list of the most prevalent equine activities in Great Britain was established. These were identified as: leisure/pleasure, racing, eventing, dressage, show jumping, showing, hunting, riding lessons, endurance, driving and polo. A second list consisting of the different roles that equine stakeholders could have was also created based on the authors’ knowledge of the equine industry. The roles recognised were: rider, owner, groom, trainer, vet, farrier, breeder, yard owner/manager, complimentary therapist, dealer, transporter, abattoir worker/knackerman, charity worker and law enforcer.

A grid was created based on these lists and used to inform recruitment to ensure that a broad cross section of stakeholders were interviewed. The aim was to cover all of the principal forms of horse activity and all of the different roles identified but not every combination.

Initial recruitment was opportunistic and mainly conducted by telephone utilising existing networks known to the first author and others involved in the project. This was accompanied by a snow-balling technique where interviewees were recruited by means of informal contact between them. Successfully recruited interviewees were asked to nominate others known to them who might similarly be eligible (Association for Qualitative Research, 2014). These ‘nominations’ were followed up where the individual identified was involved in an activity and/or a role not already represented within the sample. Recruitment continued until all of
the identified activities and roles were represented within the sample. The recruitment method adopted could not be said to provide a statistically representative sample from each of these identified roles and activity types and biases may have been introduced, for example through geographical clustering of the interviewees. As such the findings may not be generalizable across the equine stakeholder population. However, the purpose of the study was to explore the range of perceptions held and the recruitment methods provided interviewees that covered a broad cross section of the equine industry whilst also offering a sample that reflected the broader bias towards horses being kept for leisure purposes within the equine population (Hotchkiss, Reid & Christley, 2007, Boden et al., 2013).

On initial contact with potential recruits the first author introduced themselves and the aims of the research and asked if the respondent would be willing to be interviewed in-depth about their own perceptions of equine welfare as part of the study. Where recruitment was successful verbal permission to audio record the interviews was sought and a time and date was arranged for the face to face interview.
Interviews

A semi-structured approach was employed: key areas for discussion were decided prior to the interviews based on predefined areas of interest determined by the research team. The areas for discussion, which formed the basis of the interview structure in every interview were: 1) How ‘equine welfare’ is defined when a direct question is asked, 2) exploration of what horses need to ensure their welfare, 3) exploration of what may result in a horse having poor welfare, 4) exploration of examples of poor welfare witnessed by the interviewees. Around these four areas for discussion, the specifics of the questions and topics of conversation were largely driven by the interviewees and their responses, to facilitate open discussion. A pilot interview was conducted with a leisure horse owner to ensure the questions stimulated conversation around the topics of interest. Interviewee feedback was sought and the interviewer asked whether the interviewee had felt that the line of questioning was acceptable to them. From the pilot interview it was determined that the interview structure was fit for purpose and that no changes were required. No further piloting was conducted.

The interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours, depending on the depth of responses given by the interviewees, and were conducted face to face in a variety of locations including participants’ homes, equine yards and places of work. All of the interviews were conducted by the first author to ensure consistency. Before the interviews began interviewees were reminded of the purpose of the study, asked to confirm that they consented to the interview and to the audio recording and then signed a consent form in accordance with University of Bristol ethical approval guidance. At the start of the interview participants were asked to talk about their prior and present involvement with horses to provide a context for the discussion and to put the interviewees at ease. The interviewer then began asking questions around the four areas described above.
Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and underwent thematic analysis by the first author to identify recurrent and common responses, consensus and variance within and between the interviewees. Analysis focused on identifying themes relating to the different ways in which welfare was understood by the interviewees. Having identified the themes, hard copies of the transcripts were coded by hand to identify passages that related to the individual themes (see Gomm, 2008 for explanation of thematic analysis). A sample of the transcripts were analysed independently by two of the co-authors (HB and HRW) to allow for cross validation. HB had experience conducting and analysing qualitative research whilst HB and HRW were familiar with purpose of the study. In addition, neither were considered overly familiar with the British equine industry and were therefore best placed to guard against biases held by the first author impacting on the reporting of the findings.

Responses

A total of 31 stakeholders (hereafter referred to as interviewees) were interviewed. The sample size of 31 ensured coverage across all of the identified activities and roles but not every possible combination. Table I gives a description of each of the interviewees, including the role(s) that they fulfilled and activities that they were engaged in at the time of the interview. Additional background information about the interviewees is also provided to demonstrate that they had knowledge and experience beyond the role(s) for which they were selected for participation in this study.

Other demographic information, for example the age and gender of the interviewees, is not referred to as these data were either not collected or not incorporated into the reported
analysis. It should be noted that gender and age disparity amongst horse owners has been reported in a number of studies. For example, Hockenhull and Creighton (2013a) and Boden et al., (2013) reported that 97% and 95.2% of their survey respondents respectively were female. The British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) National Equestrian Survey (2015) found that 74% of the horse riding population in Britain was female. Hockenhull and Creighton (2013a) reported a mean horse owner age of 34 whilst Boden et al., (2013) reported that 51.6% of their respondents were under 45. Despite these reported disparities consideration of gender and other demographic factors in relation to the findings was beyond the scope of this current research.

[Table One about here]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections quotes from the interviews are used to explore the different ways in which the interviewees understood the concept of welfare, how the different ways of understanding may have developed and to discuss the implications these may have for equine welfare. Following accepted practices for this type of research, the results and discussion are presented together (Brennan & Emerson, 2005) to allow the findings to be directly discussed and contextualised.

Defining welfare - responses to the direct question ‘What does the term ‘equine welfare’ mean to you?’
As a starting point for discussions about welfare, interviewees were asked the direct question “What does the term ‘equine welfare’ mean to you?” It is interesting to note that only one interviewee defined equine welfare using terminology directly drawn from scientific definitions of welfare, namely the Five Freedoms, saying:

“[welfare] means freedom for water, food, expression of their natural behaviours and shelter......” (Welfare centre groom).

Whilst a further two interviewees made reference to the Five Freedoms and a small number of interviewees used terminology demonstrating familiarity with British animal welfare legislation, for example using terms such as “unnecessary suffering”, these did not form part of their formal definitions of welfare. Instead many interviewees used phrases such as “how we look after them”, “that all their needs are met” and “stable management” to describe what the term equine welfare meant to them.

The Five Freedoms (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1993) was created by welfare scientists as a framework for assessing welfare and derivatives of this framework have been incorporated into British animal welfare legislation. For example, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and supporting codes of practice for companion and farm animal species describe the five ‘needs’ of animals which are derived from the Five Freedoms (See, for example, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2013a). The codes of practice act as a practical guide to animal caregivers, outlining how to comply with welfare legislation and pay attention to the welfare of animals in their care (DEFRA, 2013b).

The definitions provided by the interviewees in this current study suggest that stakeholders’ do not base their direct understandings of the term ‘welfare’ on communications derived from scientific definitions of welfare, for example the welfare legislation and codes of practice, and as such other influences may inform their understandings of welfare.
Wider Understandings of ‘Welfare’

Through analysis of the broader conversations about welfare four themes were identified that represented perceptions across all of the interviewees, relating to the ways in which the interviewees understood welfare (see Table 2). These four different ways of understanding welfare were rarely mutually exclusive and interviewees frequently both defined and discussed welfare as combinations of these.

[Table 2 about here]

Welfare as meeting needs through provision

By far the most common way in which welfare was understood, was as the provision of needs and for all of the interviewees good welfare was equated, at least in part, to providing for the horse’s needs. As one interviewee said when asked what the term equine welfare meant to them:

“it brings to mind straight away, are they being looked after properly in terms of enough food, enough water, fresh air, exercise” (Show jumping trainer).

Poor welfare was most often associated with inadequate provision through the use of phrases such as “lack of” and words such as “neglect” and “abandonment” but in some instances poor welfare was also linked to over provision, particularly in relation to food:

“[the horses] are as fat as houses and they’re killed with kindness…..people think that food’s a way of showing their love for them when really it tips the balance and you then end up with problems because they’re over fed” (Livery yard owner).
A resource-based understanding of welfare is long established amongst welfare scientists and until recent years measuring resources has been the focus of welfare assessments (Veissier, Butterworth, Bock & Roe, 2008). Furthermore, research has shown that farmers also view resources including food, water and environment as important elements of welfare (see for example Vanhonacker, Verbeke, Van Poucke & Tuyttens, 2008). The interviewees, like many welfare scientists and farmers, found this understanding of welfare easy to understand and uncontroversial.

Whilst most of the interviewees demonstrated a degree of certainty and consensus around the importance of some resources, for example food and water, there was uncertainty and a lack of consensus regarding other needs a horse may or may not have. Some made no reference to “additional” needs and one interviewee stated:

“The horse needs very basic things. It needs somebody to feed it, to water it, to check its shoes, to check its feet, to check its teeth, end of story” (Field officer 2).

For this interviewee ensuring welfare was not “rocket science” as it could be ensured by meeting these basic needs. Further to this, any “extras”, as the interviewee described them, may result in the horse being “no happier”. This was a minority view and most of the interviewees outlined additional needs and felt that these could give added value to a horse’s life. In the extract below, one interviewee discusses what they believe to be “essential” welfare needs and then “other” welfare needs:

“[Real essentials] would be your food and water, maybe shelter as well I suppose. And I suppose the next level down from that would be an enriched environment so your herd, your space, your interaction, that sort of thing. And then I think the lowest level would be the things like rugs, nice saddles, physio appointments, the icing on the cake” (McTimoney chiropractic practitioner).
In recent years, welfare scientists have begun to discuss good welfare beyond the prevention of negative welfare states, as reflected in the Farm Animal Welfare Council’s welfare scale that states that quality of life can range from a life not worth living (poor welfare) to a life worth living (neutral welfare) to a good life (good welfare) (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009). The findings from this current study suggest that equine stakeholders, along with most welfare scientists, see welfare on a spectrum and associate particular resources with different levels of welfare.

Despite many agreeing that additional needs existed, there were sometimes conflicting views expressed about what these additional needs may be, and how important they were. For example, the following two quotes show how two interviewees disagreed about whether horses required or benefitted from access to pasture:

“So my horses, from my point of view, go out as much as they can do because it’s really important for their brain and physically to go out and let off steam and all that kind of thing” (Dressage trainer).

“I think the stabled 24 hours a day, seven days a week works really well for most horses” (Point to Point rider).

There are many schools of thought about horse care and management, and both the consensus and diversity expressed by those interviewed as part of this study is reflected and echoed in the horse care literature. The British Horse Society (BHS), one of the key organisations responsible for educating those owning and working with horses in Great Britain, publish a series of horse care manuals including the BHS Book of the Natural Horse (BHS, 2008a) and the BHS Complete Manual of Horse and Stable Management (BHS, 2008b). Whilst both these publications share some basic common principles, for example stating the importance of food, water and shelter, they also advocate different approaches to some aspects of horse
care and emphasise different needs, for example each placing different emphasis on pasture
access as a welfare need. Hockenhull and Creighton (2013b) found that books/magazines
were the most frequently used information source for UK leisure horse owners across topics
of horse behaviour, health, stable care and training. As such engagement with the horse care
literature may be one way in which differing views about welfare are developed and
reinforced.

Those responsible for the day to day care of horses appear to appreciate that ensuring welfare
involves, at least in part, meeting needs through provision of resources and there is a level of
agreement over what some of those resources are. There may be limited benefit in focusing
welfare improving strategies on these areas of consensus. Yeates and Main (2008) argue that
positive welfare, considering an animals’ likes, wants and happiness, can be assessed in part
through evaluation of the resources that are valued by an animal. As such, there could be
benefit in encouraging equine caregivers to provide resources to horses which may promote
positive welfare states i.e. resources that promote welfare states that go beyond neutral states
associated with the avoidance of negatives. Evidence from this current study suggests that
stakeholders may have differing views about what these resources may be, and their relative
importance so it will be important to ensure that stakeholders receive consistent messages in
this area.

Welfare as “horse-centered”

Most of interviewees articulated, what the authors have called a “horse-centered”
understanding of equine welfare. The emotional experience of the horse emerged as an
important component of welfare and words such as “happy”, “chilled”, “suffering”,
“stressed” were often used in relation to good and poor welfare. For some, the emotional
well-being of the horse was seen as integral to welfare. For others, it was a separate, albeit
related, concept. Most, however, appeared to intuitively feel that horses experienced
emotions although some found this aspect of welfare hard to articulate:

“All of these things [for example their happiness] are things which are perhaps quite
hard to define” (Point to point rider).

Many interviewees made a link between the emotional well-being of the horse to the
provision of “natural” needs, for example access to pasture and social contact:

“well generally I think you want a horse to have as much natural time outside as is
physically possible…..I think generally you want them to experience being outside,
with other horses, enjoying the fresh air and enjoying grass because that’s what a
horse is all about” (Leisure horse owner 1).

As with this leisure horse owner many other interviewees identified particular welfare needs,
including pasture access and social contact, based on their understanding of the “natural”
horse, and believed that a positive mental state could be achieved by meeting those needs,
conversely seeing that a negative mental state may occur when these needs were not met.

Many welfare scientists see affective states as an important component of welfare and a
body of research has developed which seeks to understand these in non-verbal species, for
example via physiological markers, behavioural indicators (see Fraser 2008 for review) and
the manipulation and measurement of cognitive processes (see Boissy et al., 2007 for
review). Current research suggests that equine welfare, in particular the horses’ emotional
well-being, may be compromised where horses are kept in environments which don’t meet
their “natural” needs. Chaplin and Gretgnix (2010) found that horses were significantly
more active when released from their stables compared to baseline paddock behaviour
whilst Christensen, Ladewig, Sondergaard and Malmkvist (2002) found that singly stabled stallions responded to social deprivation by significantly increasing their levels of social grooming and play behaviour when subsequently allowed to freely interact with other horses. These observed rebound behaviours suggest that horses are highly motivated to be active and have social contact, suggesting that freedom of movement, for example via pasture access, and social contact are important for the emotional well-being of the horse. Despite this research, the role of naturalness in supporting good welfare is not clear cut. For example ‘naturalness’ may include death via predation and therefore animals living in natural environments may experience severe pain. Broom (2011) therefore argues that whilst a natural environment may not provide optimal welfare the environment in which domestic animals live must meet the needs which have resulted from their “nature” in order to ensure good welfare. Despite welfare scientists largely agreeing that natural needs are an important component of welfare, fully understanding the specific role of “naturalness” in relation to affective states remains challenging. Considering this lack of a clear cut link between the concept of ‘naturalness’ and welfare it is not surprising that the interviewees in this study also found this aspect of welfare hard to articulate, despite intuitively seeing it as important.

The majority of those responsible for the day to day care of horses may understand the importance of considering affective states in the promotion of welfare. Where scientific knowledge exists, efforts should be made to promote positive emotional states in horses, for example through encouraging caregivers to ensure the ‘natural’ needs of horses in their care are met.

Welfare as a negative term
For the majority of interviewees, the terminology of welfare had overarching negative rather than positive connotations. Words such as “suffering” “neglect” “cruelty” “abuse” and “abandonment” were often used by the interviewees in conversations about welfare and for a small number of interviewees their notion of welfare revolved around the avoidance of negatives and was discussed in the following ways:

“[the] avoidance of discomfort or pain” (Welfare centre groom).

“I just think anything to do with horses, you might not agree with me, I might not agree with you, but as long as that horse isn’t suffering as a result then that’s fine” (Senior welfare charity worker).

“Poor” welfare was frequently discussed in terms of situations where non-compliance with the welfare legislation was suggested, perhaps explaining the negative associations the interviewees had with the concept of welfare. When asked to give examples of poor welfare they had seen, many turned, at least in the first instance to examples where welfare charities had been involved to enforce welfare legislation. For example, when asked “can you give examples of poor welfare you have seen first-hand?” one interviewee responded:

“At the vets I’ve seen, you know we’ve had RSPCA cases bought in and stuff so you see the really malnourished….and we get them because they’ve collapsed in the field basically and they’ll be very, very ribby and full of worms….” (Owner of a retired horse).

Furthermore, some interviewees stated that they could not give examples of poor welfare they had seen first-hand as they had not witnessed situations where the welfare charities had been involved.
In Great Britain equine stakeholders receive few communications that directly utilise the term “welfare” but one of the ways they are exposed to the concept of “welfare” is through the context of the work of equine welfare charities and related publicity. Serpell (2004) discusses how public perceptions of welfare may be influenced by “cultural attitude modifiers” including the media, while Jones (1997) states that mass communication can sometimes present superficial coverage or exaggerate extreme positions which in turn may result in a narrow view of “welfare”. Graphic images of extreme examples of horse neglect, abuse and suffering are often used in communication between equine welfare charities and stakeholders, in particular via television documentaries and appeals. The findings from this current research suggest that these representations may be influencing the way in which equine stakeholders understand “welfare” as evidenced by the way in which the interviewees directly link the word “welfare” to examples of welfare cases that the welfare charities had been involved in.

Perhaps because of these negative associations, for the majority of the interviewees “poor” welfare was seen as a problem for other people and their horses, in particular horses owned by or cared for by people that were in some way different to themselves:

“I think a lot of people don’t bother feeding. You see fields full of ponies turned out, and they’re looking awfully skinny, not being fed enough. You don’t see that a lot round here” (Leisure horse owner 2).

The phrase “round here” is significant, as it suggests a sense of separation and distance from examples of poor welfare which may be observed. Examples of poor welfare were often associated with disciplines or areas of horse use that differed from those the interviewees were directly involved with, or with “other” geographical areas both within and outside Great Britain. Bandura (1999) discusses advantageous comparison as a means of moral
disengagement, whereby people emphasis the “wrongdoings” of others to make their own
cconduct look better. Such mechanisms may result in equine stakeholders passing the blame
for poor welfare on to ‘others’ whilst absolving themselves from responsibility. It has been
suggested that moral disengagement may result in violence towards animals (Vollum,
Buffington-Vollum and Longmire, 2004) and may also be a mechanism that allows
consumers to disconnect themselves from the ‘mass abuse’ that occurs within the farming
industry (Mitchell, 2011). As such moral disengagement may be an important psychological
mechanism to consider in relation to practices associated with equine welfare and the moral
disengagement framework was recently used by Voigt, Russel, Hiney, Richardson, Borron
and Brady, 2015) to explore the factors influencing the inhumane treatment of show horses.

It is important to consider the negative associations that stakeholders have with the word
“welfare” in communications with stakeholders as use of the word may result in defensive
attitudes. Where stakeholders want to distance themselves from the term they may not seek
out, access or utilise information that pertains to “welfare” and using alternative language
may be beneficial. Negative associations with the word ‘welfare’ may be resulting in
disproportionate emphasis being placed on some welfare problems, for example those
associated with minority groups. As discussed further in the next section, objective welfare
assessment may be needed to ensure an accurate view of the current welfare status of horses
in Great Britain.

“Welfare” in my own context

Whilst many of the examples of poor welfare provided by the interviewees were of contexts
that the interviewees felt personally removed from they nevertheless frequently discuss
scenarios that they witnessed in their own contexts. In the extract below, the horse owner that kept their horses at home, explains how one of their horses was injured:

“If we hadn’t have turned him out on his own it [the horse getting injured] wouldn’t have happened. But these sort of things do happen […], it doesn’t matter how careful you are, they are horses, they’re animals and you can’t avoid sometimes […] we had the vet, got looked after, back to normal, absolutely fine” (Leisure horse owner 2).

It could be argued that the horses’ welfare, in this situation, had been compromised as it had been injured. However, for this interviewee the above scenario did not represent a welfare problem, not least because they had taken positive action by getting veterinary advice after the incident. The phrase “these sort of things do happen” suggests that the interviewee viewed the incident as inevitable and even acceptable, possibly because these types of incident were, in their experience, common. Many of the interviewees defined ‘good welfare’ in relation to their social context and one leisure horse owner stated that it was “quite difficult” to talk about any welfare problems they had seen first-hand:

“because I mix in the circles I do, and most people I’m around are people like me, who are of the same kind of ilk [type of person], we all tend to look after our horses in a similar manner” (Leisure horse owner 1).

For this interviewee good welfare appeared to be largely defined by what they and those around them did, perhaps suggesting that to be “normal” was also to be acceptable.

Another interviewee suggested that not only were some potential welfare problems commonplace and seen “day in day out”, they were also, perhaps because of the frequency, not perceived to be welfare problems by many:
“…..from a professional point of view I see things day in day out that concern me which I would call animal welfare but your typical owner might not..” (Rehabilitation yard owner).

This interviewee went on to discuss problems they saw regularly including horses being transported for long periods of time without rest and stress responses in horses exhibited by horses when being ridden. Burn (2014) discusses how some welfare problems may become accepted or normalised when they are highly prevalent in a given population and Bandura (1999) states that people may act more cruelly when they consider there to be group responsibility for their actions than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions. Birke, Hockenhull and Creighton (2010) discuss how ideas about what is good for the horse are socially generated amongst leisure horse owners and that doing as other horse owners do is an important cultural feature of the leisure horse sector. As such, common welfare compromising practices may become acceptable as large groups of people engage in them.

The difficulties associated with ensuring all aspects of welfare may be one reason why management practices that compromise one or more aspect of welfare become common place and normalised even though they may only partially meet the welfare needs of the horse. Some of the problems associated with ensuring aspects of welfare were discussed by the interviewees. For example, one interviewee talked about the importance of pasture access and then said:

“I’ve said all this but mine have been kept in 24-7 for quite a while because of the weather….I would love to turn them out but it’s the worry that they will injure themselves with the packing [of snow]” (Dressage trainer).
As this quote suggests knowledge of the practices that promote good welfare may not always result in them being implemented. Visser et al., (2011) report similar findings and suggest that this may be a result of horse owners having conceptual knowledge (“knowing that”) but not procedural knowledge (“knowing how…”). The current study suggests practical constraints associated with ensuring optimal welfare may also be a factor and Bandura (1999) discusses how people may blame their circumstances to exonerate themselves from responsibility for their actions. As such, perceptions of the practical constraints associated with ensuring optimal welfare may act as a barrier to welfare improvement.

Finally, in the current study, some interviewees used language to down play the significance of potential welfare compromises that they witnessed. Here the carriage driver describes something which they saw frequently at competitions and training events:

“[the horse] is backing off because [the tack] doesn’t fit and you’ve got this drop noseband on when you shouldn’t have, it can’t breathe and it’s welfare in a …in a soft form, does that make sense?”

The phrase “welfare in a …in a soft form” shows how this interviewee differentiated this example, something they reported seeing frequently in a familiar setting, from other welfare problems which they were more distanced from and euphemistic labelling has been highlighted by Bandura (1999) as another means by which moral disengagement may manifest itself.

The findings from this current study suggest that equine stakeholders acknowledge that some compromises in “welfare”, as welfare scientists might understand them, do occur in their own familiar settings. For example, they acknowledge that domestic horses may experience pain and injury or be kept in suboptimal environments. However, failures to ensure “welfare” may be seen as morally unacceptable due to the negative associations with the term and
moral disengagement may be one way in which equine stakeholders avoid a sense of conflicting values that results from this. If the profile of the equine population is considered it can be suggested that welfare problems affecting minority groups of horses may have been over emphasised whilst potential problems affecting larger sectors, for example the leisure horse sector, may have been over looked, down played or normalised.

There is a need to objectively and holistically evaluate the welfare of horses kept in all contexts to ensure that welfare problems are recognised across the sectors and that practices are not overlooked because they are common and/or seen by a large proportion of the industry to be acceptable. Further inter-disciplinary research into the processes by which welfare related practices are generated and perpetuated is likely to be necessary to fully understand and overcome some of the psychological factors that act as barriers to the recognition and alleviation of some equine welfare problems.

CONCLUSIONS

In- depth discussion with stakeholders about equine welfare in England and Wales gave a unique insight into the different ways that welfare is understood by them and their first-hand experience of how welfare is ensured. As such, this research provides an important foundation for future work, for example to explore how psychological factors and demographic factors including age, gender and role within the industry impact on perceptions of equine welfare and associated practices.

In many ways the stakeholders interviewed had an understanding of welfare that was not too dissimilar to definitions provided by welfare scientists, for example acknowledging
components of health and physiology, naturalness and affective state similar to that proposed by Fraser et al., (1997). They emphasised resources in relation to ensuring welfare, as has been historically the case with welfare scientists, but also discussed the emotional wellbeing of the horse. Despite these similarities there was little evidence that this had resulted from a direct knowledge of scientific definitions of welfare. The current research offers some insight into the complex processes by which stakeholders construct and act upon concepts of ‘good’ and ‘poor’ welfare. Greater depth of research into these processes and means of influencing them is needed to facilitate the development of strategies that are likely to result in an improvement in equine welfare. It may not be necessary for equine stakeholders to access scientific definitions of welfare for welfare improvement to occur. However, findings from scientific research into equine welfare should be incorporated into any welfare-improving strategies and do need to be effectively communicated to stakeholders. By utilising the evidence base there is a much greater chance that, where implemented, welfare improvement approaches will lead to benefits to the horse.

There was a tendency for interviewees to associate welfare problems with contexts and management methods that were perceived to be different from those they were familiar with. In contrast they under-recognised or down played the significance of “welfare” compromises seen within their own or familiar contexts. When considering equine welfare improvement it is important to take an objective approach to ensure that all welfare issues are identified and that research does not focus on minority welfare problems whilst overlooking welfare problems that are commonplace, but not always labelled as welfare problems.

One of the ways in which equine stakeholders appear to have received strong messages about welfare is through publicity from the welfare charities which may lead to narrow perceptions of welfare as something negative and problematic through graphic images of welfare cases, for example, on popular television programmes. As such, careful consideration needs to be
paid when communicating with stakeholders about “welfare” and there is a need for stakeholders to receive clear and consistent messages, based on welfare science, relating to the welfare needs of horses. There is also a need to think about the language used when communicating with equine stakeholders about welfare as the term has negative associations that may be distancing individuals who do not see the “welfare” literature as relevant to them.

REFERENCES


Vollum, S., Buffington-Vollum, J. & Dennis, R. Moral Disengagement and Attitudes about Violence towards Animals. *Society and Animals, 12* (3) 209-235

Table One - Description of each interviewee as used in the results and discussion section to identify the source of quotes used, activity (s) each interviewee was involved in and role (s) they fulfilled at the time of the interview and other background information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of interviewee</th>
<th>Activity (s) they were involved in</th>
<th>Role (s) they fulfilled</th>
<th>Other background information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leisure horse owner 1</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure Riding lessons</td>
<td>Rider, owner</td>
<td>Pony owner as a child. Bought the horse owned at time of interview, which was kept on a livery yard, after having a break from horses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure horse owner 2</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure Riding lessons</td>
<td>Rider, owner</td>
<td>Kept their horse and children’s ponies on their own land at home. Held an industry recognised riding and training qualification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure horse loaner</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure Riding lessons</td>
<td>Rider</td>
<td>Loaned a horse for their child. The horse was kept on a livery yard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livery yard owner</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure</td>
<td>Yard owner/manager</td>
<td>Ran a livery yard for leisure/pleasure horses and riders. Had been a horse owner throughout life. Studied equine business management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi feral pony owner</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure</td>
<td>Rider, owner</td>
<td>Family had owned ponies on the New Forest for many generations. Bred New Forest ponies and produced them for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveller</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure Driving</td>
<td>Rider, owner, breeder</td>
<td>Member of the travelling community. Bred and trained horses for carriage driving. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner of a retired horse</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Had been a horse owner throughout life and bred two foals from their retired horse which they brought on and still owned and rode.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving coach</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure Driving</td>
<td>Trainer</td>
<td>Competitive driver and trainer of drivers and driving horses. Had previously represented Great Britain in driving competitions. Also a horse owner at time of interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior welfare charity worker</td>
<td>Wide Range^2</td>
<td>Charity worker</td>
<td>Worked in a large equine welfare charity. Had been a horse owner throughout life. Studied equine related subjects at university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare charity centre manager</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Charity worker, yard owner/manager</td>
<td>Previous involvement with equine rehabilitation, equine veterinary nursing and had run a livery yard. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare charity groom</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Charity worker, groom</td>
<td>Had previously worked in a riding school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field officer 1</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Charity worker</td>
<td>Studied equine management at college and had industry recognised riding and teaching qualifications. Experience working in riding schools, on breeding yards and hunting yards. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field officer 2</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Charity worker</td>
<td>Had previously worked in the mounted police force. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading standards officer</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Law enforcer</td>
<td>Previous experience working on an equine welfare research project. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^1 A livery yard is an establishment where horse owners pay a fee to house their horses, often also paying for their horses to be looked after some or all of the time.

^2 These interviewees were involved with horses that were engaged in a wide range of the activities identified.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knackerman 3</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Owned their own horses and bred horses on a small scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abattoir owner</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Long term involvement in the meat export business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressage trainer and rider</td>
<td>Dressage</td>
<td>Had previously competed in Show Jumping and bought and sold dressage horses internationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show jumping trainer</td>
<td>Show jumping</td>
<td>British Show jumping qualified coach. Also bred and produced show jumping horses. Horse owner for most of their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freelance instructor and groom</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure</td>
<td>Worked mainly with leisure/pleasure horses and riders. Held industry recognised riding and teaching qualifications. Ran a riding school for seven years before going freelance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race trainer</td>
<td>Racing</td>
<td>Represented Britain as a young showjumper and then moved into evening before getting their trainers license.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endurance rider</td>
<td>Endurance</td>
<td>Previously competed in eventing and dressage to a high level. Had been a member of the British endurance team. Owned a riding school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point to point 4 rider</td>
<td>Leisure/pleasure</td>
<td>Previously competed in eventing. Regularly hunted and had been a horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polo player</td>
<td>Polo</td>
<td>Ran a polo yard with their partner who competed internationally. Involved with breeding polo ponies. Also evented. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show pony owner</td>
<td>Showing</td>
<td>Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrier 1</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Mainly worked with leisure horses. Had been a horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrier 2</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Worked mainly with leisure horses and had a particular interest in remedial farriery. Trained and rode race horses and schooled young horses when younger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equine podiatrist 5</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet 1</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Worked primarily with leisure horses. Owned horses throughout life and, at the time of the interview, had a horse on loan to hunt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet 2</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Worked primarily with leisure horses. Horse owner for much of their life. At time of interview had several horses kept on their own land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation yard owner</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Worked with post-operative horses, horses coming back into work after injury and horses with behaviour problems. Competed at dressage. Had previously groomed with the British dressage team and ran their own livery yard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McTimoney 6</td>
<td>Wide Range</td>
<td>Had previously worked as a groom before training as a chiropractor. Horse owner throughout life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3 A knackerman is someone who kills and disposes of horses that cannot enter the human food chain.
4 Point to Point is a form of amateur jump horseracing.
5 Provides a service trimming horses’ feet
6 McTimoney is a specific chiropractic treatment method
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare as meeting needs</td>
<td>For many interviewees the term welfare was associated strongly with the meeting of needs and the provision of resources, for example food, water and shelter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare as “horse centred”</td>
<td>This definition related specifically to how the horse experienced its world and its emotional well-being. Within this definition there were strong links to “natural needs” and how these impacted on the horses’ emotional experience of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare as a negative term</td>
<td>For many, welfare was seen as a negative term and good welfare was seen to relate to the avoidance of negative states. As such, poor welfare was associated with “other” peoples’ horses and horses kept in contexts which were less familiar to the interviewees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Welfare” in my own context</td>
<td>Many interviewees discussed things which they saw in settings similar to their own which could be interpreted as welfare problems. However, the interviewees themselves did not always see these as welfare problems or downplayed their significance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>