
Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1080/10888705.2017.1283226

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor & Francis at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10888705.2017.1283226. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research
General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/
Equine welfare assessment: An exploration of British stakeholder attitudes using focus group discussions

Abstract

The equine industry in Great Britain (GB) has not been subject to the same pressures as the farming industry to engage with welfare assessment but this may change as concern about equine welfare increases. Stakeholder perceptions of, and attitudes towards, welfare assessment may impact on the implementation of welfare assessment practices. Focus group discussions regarding the development of a welfare assessment tool were conducted with six equine stakeholder groups: leisure horse owners (n=4), grooms (n=5), veterinary surgeons (n=3), welfare scientists n=4), welfare charity workers (n=5) and professional riders (n=4).

Three themes emerged from the discussions: 1) participants predominantly interpreted welfare assessment as a means of identifying and correcting poor welfare in an immediate way; 2) participants believed that horse welfare varied over time; and 3) attributes of the assessor were viewed as an important consideration for equine welfare assessment. The views of equine industry members give insight into the value welfare assessments may have to the industry and how equine welfare assessment approaches can achieve credibility within the industry and increase the positive impact that welfare assessments can have on equine welfare.

Keywords: attitudes; focus group; horse; stakeholder; welfare assessment
Introduction

Animal welfare assessment is vital for welfare improvement in all animal species as it allows for the identification of problems and associated risk factors (Whay, 2007). In Great Britain (GB) assessment of the welfare of horses currently only occurs in limited circumstances, for example the licensing of riding schools (Gov.UK, 2015). In contrast, pressure from consumers has resulted in substantial investment in the development of welfare assessment tools for use on farms which are now an integral part of food assurance schemes such as The Red Tractor scheme (Red Tractor, n.d.a), RSPCA Assured (RSPCA Assured, n.d) and the Soil Association organic accreditation (Soil Association, n.d). As concern about the welfare of the equine population increases (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), welfare assessment across the horse population may be advocated as a means of identifying problems and targeting the resources available for improvement most effectively. As such, the equine industry may be required to engage more in welfare assessment and there have been suggestions from both within and outside the industry that assessment should become more widespread, for example through the licensing of livery yards (Owers & MacMillan, 2011).

The tools currently available for assessing the welfare of equids both at a population level and individual horse level have been reviewed by Hockenhull and Whay (2014), and recently holistic welfare assessment protocols for use by the equine industry have been developed within the Welfare Monitoring System (Wageneingen UR Liverstock Research, 2011) and the European Animal Welfare Indicators (AWIN) project (AWIN, n.d). In addition, on-going work, for example that being carried out in Sweden to develop a welfare assessment tool for use in horses in line with the Welfare Quality® protocols (Viksten, Nyman, Visser, &
Blockhuis, 2012) is likely to yield further protocols as another step towards promoting and supporting equine welfare assessment and improvement.

Evidence from the farming industry suggests that stakeholder attitudes to welfare assessment can vary and challenges to the implementation of welfare assessment have been identified. Hubbard, Bourlakis, and Garrod (2007) found that UK pig farmers often felt they had no choice but to join an assurance scheme and engage in assessment to ensure they could sell their produce. Whilst many of the farmers interviewed by Hubbard et al. (2007) felt that the schemes were well organized and run, they felt negatively about the amount of paperwork that resulted through the process of auditing. Roe, Buller and Bull (2011) observed the on-farm assessment process and found that few farmers looked “comfortable” whilst their farm was being assessed describing audit day as a “nervous time” for farmers, suggesting that farmers may have negative emotional reactions to the process of assessment.

The equine industry differs from the farming industry in a number of distinct ways. Firstly, whilst horses are often kept to fulfil a purpose, for example competition horses, they can also be considered a companion animal. In this sense they are neither a production animal nor a pet, but hold a dual function that is less often seen in farm or companion animal species. Secondly, the equine industry could be considered to be much more diverse than the farming industry both in terms of the many different purposes horses have and the ways in which horses are managed. Wylie, Ireland, Collins, Verheyen, and Newman (2013a) found that horses in GB are used for a number of purposes including leisure (including hacking and hunting), competition (including dressage, show jumping, racing and endurance) and breeding. There was variation in the premises that horses were kept on and management methods including stable vs. pasture keep. As such, it could be argued that the farming industry is more uniform than the equine industry. These fundamental differences may mean that equine stakeholders differ from farmers in their perceptions of welfare assessment and
different barriers and motivating factors may exist compared to those associated with farm animal welfare assessment. The benefits of incorporating equine stakeholder perspectives into the development of equine welfare assessment approaches have been noted by Minero (2014) who describes how stakeholders were consulted about welfare indicators and barriers and solutions to the implementation of the AWIN protocol in Europe. To date no research has looked at the attitudes of equine stakeholders in GB to equine welfare assessment. Such research may be beneficial for facilitating equine welfare improvement in GB through the implementation of equine welfare assessment tools.

Focus group discussions are a form of qualitative research whereby a group of participants are brought together for the purpose of discussing an issue or idea predetermined by the researcher. The discussions are guided by a facilitator but the emphasis is on the interactions between the group members, the way they respond to and build on each other’s views and the agreement and disagreement between group members (Morgan, 1997). In this way the approach differs from one to one interviews which explore individual responses. Focus groups are also a resource-effective way of gathering opinions from a range of stakeholders and are increasingly being used by researchers as a means of exploring stakeholder perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in relation to veterinary medicine and animal welfare. For example, Coyne et al. (2014) used focus groups to explore antimicrobial use and prescribing behaviors by veterinary surgeons and farmers whilst Kaler and Green (2013) explored sheep farmer opinions on the role of the veterinary surgeon in flock health management utilizing focus groups. Qualitative research methods, including focus groups, were used by Collins et al. (2012) to explore stakeholder perceptions of solutions to equine welfare problems in Ireland. The aim of this study was to explore, through the use of focus groups, equine stakeholders’ perceptions of, and attitudes towards welfare assessment. Through the process of discussing approaches to welfare assessment with equine
stakeholders, it was envisaged that insight would be gained into more general attitudes and perceptions in relation to welfare assessment. The authors also aimed, by utilizing focus groups, to explore any similarities and differences in attitudes or perceptions which may exist between individuals and/or between different groups of stakeholders. This insight, it was believed, could subsequently be utilized to inform the successful implementation of welfare assessment tools within the GB equine industry.

Materials and Methods

Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited to reflect the main stakeholder groups within the equine industry, identified by the research team as: leisure horse owners, grooms, professional riders, equine veterinary surgeons, equine welfare charity workers and equine welfare scientists. It was decided that each group should consist of people with similar roles to prevent the potential effects of power relationships within each group (See Stewart & Shamdasani 2014, p27 for discussion of social power as a consideration). Therefore six focus groups were proposed, one for each of the stakeholder groups identified above.

Recruitment was conducted using networks known to the first author and associates of the project via e-mail, telephone and social media. Snowballing techniques were also employed where participants were recruited by means of informal contact between them. This involved asking successfully recruited interviewees to nominate others known to them who might be similarly eligible (Association for Qualitative Research, n.d). As the purpose of this study was to explore the range of opinions held rather than the relative frequencies of opinions held across a representative sample of industry stakeholders this sampling strategy was deemed appropriate. The authors aimed to recruit between three and seven participants for each group
to allow a variety of views to be heard and ensure the discussions were practical to facilitate 
(See Stewart & Shamdasani 2014, p. 64 for discussion on focus group participant numbers).

During the recruitment process potential participants were informed about the purpose of the 
study, and the format and logistics of the focus group discussions. Where recruitment was 
successful verbal permission to audio record the focus group discussions was sought. A 
mutually convenient time, date and location for the focus group discussion was arranged via e 
-mail and telephone correspondence. In accordance with University of Bristol ethical 
guidance all participants were sent an information sheet and consent form in advance of the 
meeting. The consent form was signed by participants before the focus group discussion 
started and guaranteed anonymity and data security and ensured written consent for the audio 
recording of the discussions was gained.

Focus Group Discussion Structure

Discussions were held between September and December 2013, at a variety of locations for 
the convenience of the participants, and lasted between two and three hours. The group sizes 
ranged from three to six individuals, dependent on recruitment response rates and actual 
attendance on the day, and a total of 25 individuals took part in the study. The focus groups 
were facilitated by the first author, who led the discussions ensuring that the perspectives of 
all participants were heard and that any emerging social influence was managed. One of the 
co-authors acted as note-taker. A pilot focus group was conducted independently to the main 
study with a group of four leisure horse owners. The participants taking part in the pilot 
found discussing welfare assessment approaches very difficult and it was observed that this 
was due to limited background knowledge about welfare assessment on the part of the 
participants. As a result, in subsequent discussions, background information about the 
different approaches to welfare assessment, for example using animal based and resource 
based measures, was given to participants by the facilitator during the introduction to the
subsequent discussions. Following the introduction each member of the group was asked to introduce themselves and to give a brief description of their background and current role within the industry. The facilitator then led discussions in two sections. Firstly, the groups were asked to discuss freely amongst themselves the important elements that contribute to horse welfare, described to the participants as welfare needs, which should be considered when designing a welfare assessment. The different ‘needs’ raised were noted on a flip chart as the participants raised them and were subsequently utilized as a basis for the second section of the discussions. Here the groups were asked to reflect on their list of the different elements of welfare and to talk about how these could or should be assessed. Around the two broad topics/questions (elements of welfare and means to assess) no specific further questions were asked across the focus groups. Instead, the focus groups followed a semi-structured approach around the two topics. Follow-up questions asked by the facilitator were in direct response to the participant’s comments, for example asking for a further explanation or points of clarity.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the first author. In the first instance the transcripts were analyzed to identify the emerging themes within the individual focus groups and to look for consensus and variance of opinion within the focus groups. A second level of analysis was then carried out to identify common themes, consensus and variance between the focus groups. Analysis focused on identifying themes which were particularly pertinent to the development and implementation of a welfare assessment tool to assess the welfare of horses across the GB horse population. Having identified the key themes that emerged from the focus groups and areas where there was agreement and/or disagreement the first author discussed these with the focus group note-taker who validated these themes with reference to their notes.
Results and Discussion

The participants

The 25 participants had a wide range of experiences within the equine industry covering the major disciplines including eventing, racing, show jumping, dressage, endurance and leisure use. The profiles of the group participants are listed in table 1.

---------------------
Table 1 about here
---------------------

Themes around welfare assessment

Through analysis of the transcripts three themes emerged relating to equine stakeholders’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the welfare assessment of horses: 1) perceptions of the purposes welfare assessments could serve, 2) the format they perceived a welfare assessment should take, 3) the role of the assessor in welfare assessment. In addition to these, other areas of discussion included physical, mental and “natural” components of welfare and the value of using technology, for example video recording equipment, in welfare assessments.

One of the reasons for utilizing focus groups in this study was to explore group dynamics, how the individuals in the group disagreed and/or how they came to a consensus, and the transcripts were analyzed to look for these features. However, whilst there were some
differences between the groups, discussed in the following sections, in general there was consensus within the groups and this is reflected in the presented analysis.

In the following sections the three main themes that emerged are expanded on using supporting quotes from the focus group participants to illustrate and discuss these themes in relation to the current understanding of welfare and its assessment.

*The Purpose of a Welfare Assessment*

Some of the participants showed an awareness of structures in place within the industry to monitor and support welfare standards and reference was made to the Codes of Practice published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra, 2013) and to local authority riding school inspections. They were also aware of organizations involved in promoting welfare standards. In the extract below, one of the leisure horse owners discusses the British Horse Society (BHS), a UK based charity that promotes horse welfare and provides industry recognized training to those responsible for caring for horses and training horses and riders, and its role in supporting welfare standards. They go on to suggest how alternative approaches may be beneficial:

*I think to some degree it goes back to what the BHS says, because [according] to BHS standards, should I have my horse? Maybe to go to a more all-encompassing perspective of things, maybe you want not to have the stigma of the BHS, and a much more everyday person welfare sort of thing.........Use them as a frame, like their sort of ideas, but without the stigma and judgement.* (Leisure horse owner)

Existing structures were sometimes negatively perceived and there was also a perception that welfare assessment would be viewed negatively within the wider equine population. As one of the grooms stated in relation to the attitudes of those that may be assessed:

*People are going to have a perception that you are there to find things wrong.* (Groom)
One of the reasons the participants believed that welfare assessment would be viewed negatively within the industry may be that they themselves interpreted the concept of welfare in a negative way and one of the grooms pointed out:

> When you think of horse welfare, your immediate thought is RSPCA, or... various charities.....because welfare is always used in that context. You never see the stories about horses that have excellent welfare, because nobody reads about that." (Groom)

On only one occasion was welfare assessment discussed as a means of specifically identifying and rewarding good practice:

> I suppose you could have encouragement....you could say, this yard is [named facilitator] approved....you create a sort of idea and a sort of package, that people could openly sign themselves up to and say 'look, I meet this standard. I'm amazing. Come to my yard.' (Leisure horse owner)

For those involved in enforcing welfare legislation, the primary purpose of the welfare assessments that they carry out is to determine whether welfare laws have been broken or to serve improvement notices to individual owners. For them, discussing welfare assessment for a different purpose was difficult, supported by the following quote:

> I think from your point of view, from what you're trying to do here is, it's quite difficult for us. Because all of us only deal with that situation where it's a welfare problem and that's why we're phoned. All we have to do is why it's a welfare problem and what needs to be done about it. (Welfare charity worker)

It is perhaps unsurprising that those involved with welfare legislation reinforcement understand welfare assessment as a tool for identifying poor welfare. However, findings from this current study suggest that this interpretation may be evident in the wider equine industry.

Serpell (2004) and Jones (1997) have both discussed the role of the media in influencing stakeholders’ perceptions and attitudes towards welfare. Media representations of welfare and its assessment often focus on extreme cases of abuse and neglect and for many equine
stakeholders the only way they may see examples of equine welfare assessment is through
media representations and personal observation of welfare legislation enforcement
(Horseman et al., in press). Welfare assessment for the purpose of reward is relatively
unheard of in the GB equine industry. Where assessments do take place this is often for the
purposes of licensing, for example riding schools and racing training yards. Here passing
means that the license is given or renewed rather than a pass offering a reward per se and as
such the theoretical threat of not receiving the license may result in negative associations.
One exception to this is the British Horse Society (BHS) approval system that offers livery
yards, riding schools and holiday riding centers the chance to be BHS approved with two
additional grades of commended and highly commended also awarded (BHS, n.d). One of
the aims of the AWIN horse welfare assessment protocol is to ‘to highlight positive
conditions’ (AWIN, 2015). However, the current research suggests that the protocol is
currently not widely recognized within the GB equine industry. In contrast, the GB farming
industry have greater experience of welfare assessment as a means of promoting and
rewarding higher welfare standards through a range of “opt in” certification schemes offering
different levels of welfare assurance. Even so, some farmers still view the assessment process
negatively, perhaps because in many instances farmers are unable to access markets for their
produce without “opting in” (Hubbard et al., 2007) and because participation in the schemes
may be costly. Understanding the pre-existing negative associations within the equine
industry towards welfare assessment, and working with the industry to address concerns and
alter perceptions may improve acceptance of compulsory assessment and may also encourage
voluntary uptake of welfare assessment within the industry.
Within the field of welfare science welfare assessment serves several purposes including
identifying welfare problems, carrying out population level surveillance of welfare and
identifying risk factors leading to welfare problems (Whay, 2007) with the ultimate aim of
facilitating long term welfare improvement. In this study it was found that the value of collecting population data about the care, management and welfare of horses in GB was doubted by some participants. For example, in discussion with the professional riders, the facilitator described how welfare assessments could be carried out with no immediate feedback being given to the horse owner to which one participant responded “What’s the point of it, then?” The facilitator then discussed the prospect that “results” from the assessments could be collated to inform our understanding of the current welfare status of the equine population, to which another participant responded “There would be no point in doing it.”

One of the reasons for doubting the value of welfare assessment for the purposes of data collection may have been that many of the participants believed they knew what the main welfare concerns were and the contexts in which poor welfare was occurring. As one of the professional riders stated:

*Your happy hacker, keep one in the garden, having had four lessons at the local riding school, doing it with the horse in one hand and the book in the other. That is where you’re going to find most of the abuse.* (Professional rider)

From this standpoint of assumed knowledge, it is easy to see how a welfare assessment protocol for gathering information may not be perceived as worthwhile and demonstrates that equine stakeholders believe the current understanding of the welfare status of horses in GB to be adequate. Research in the field of equine welfare has provided some insight into the welfare problems facing GB horses. For example Wylie, Collins, Verheyen, and Newton (2013b) reported on the prevalence of laminitis within the horse population, whilst Mullan, Szmaragd, Hotchkiss, and Whay (2014) investigated the welfare of tethered and free-ranging horses on common land in South Wales. To date there has been limited surveillance across the horse population that also considers the many different facets of welfare. There is
therefore limited information of the prevalence of welfare problems across the industry reducing our ability to target welfare improvement. This knowledge deficit was either not acknowledged, or seen as important, by most of the participants in this study, the majority of whom showed confidence in their perceptions.

One of the roles welfare assessment can have is to either validate or challenge existing stakeholder perceptions. Mullan et al. (2014) describe how tethering of horses is an “emotive subject” within the UK, a practice which the RSPCA refers to as being unsuitable “for the long term management of an animal”. Mullan et al.’s study (2014) showed that some aspects of welfare may be compromised through the practice of tethering horses: in only 16.5% of observations were tethered horses seen to have access to shelter, putting them at risk of compromised welfare in inclement weather. However, the observed tethered horses showed a similar behavioral repertoire to free-ranging horses and showed more positive reactions to the observer during an approach test than free-ranging horses. Severe physical welfare problems were only infrequently seen in both the tethered and free-ranging horses. The findings suggest that the welfare consequences of specific management practices may differ from stakeholders’ perceptions of the effects.

Some of our participants felt that industry wide assessment may highlight welfare concerns which may be difficult for the industry to address:

But I think you have to be careful, there is a whole…. commercial side, competition etc., and much of how they operate couldn't happen if you introduce this same style of requirements for every horse in the country….The Household Cavalry in London, for example, couldn't be kept the way that they are…..Or the racehorses that are kept stabled constantly, apart from the hour and a half when they're out on exercise. They couldn't do that, and the dressage horses and the show jumpers, you know, the elite performers. (Welfare scientist)

This may have been another reason why some groups did not discuss welfare assessment as a means of collecting data. As demonstrated in the quote above, some of the participants
recognized that welfare assessment could have purposes beyond that of welfare legislation enforcement. However, they sometimes articulated that broader assessment posed a “threat” to the industry, for example by challenging “common” practices. As articulated in the above quote, and supported by the literature, some horses in GB may be stabled constantly (see for example Wylie et al., 2013a), directly contradicting their “natural” behavioral needs (Kiley-Worthington, 1997). Horseman et al. (in press) discuss how some welfare compromises are either normalized and/or seen as difficult to overcome and that objective welfare assessment across the industry may be necessary to ensure that all welfare problems are identified. The findings from this current study suggest that there may be a lack of industry level appreciation of this. Those interested in promoting welfare improvement across the industry through objective welfare assessment may need to convince the equine industry of the value of objective, population level welfare assessment and also address industry level concerns about the possible ramifications of industry wide assessment sensitively.

It should be noted that one group, that of the welfare scientists, appeared to have a different understanding of the purpose of welfare assessment to that expressed within the other focus groups, reflecting their academic background in welfare science and their understanding of our knowledge gaps in relation to the welfare status of GB horses. This group primarily discussed welfare assessment from the stand point of collecting population level data on welfare indicators and risk factors and were much more comfortable discussing welfare assessment as a research tool aimed at more long term, wider welfare improvement.

Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, possible purposes of equine welfare assessment framed discussions about other aspects of the assessment process, including the format and role of the assessor.
The format of welfare assessments

Participants discussed incorporating both resource-based measures and horse-based measures of health, mental well-being and the adequacy of the environment as important features of a welfare assessment. In addition, considerable emphasis was put on two specific aspects of the format of welfare assessments: 1) the need to assess welfare over a period of time and 2) the value of incorporating dialogue with the horse owner into the assessment.

Many group participants discussed how the welfare status of a horse was not fixed in time and how you could not determine the welfare status of an animal through one assessment:

*I think you have to look at things a couple of times to definitely give more of a welfare grade....*(Leisure horse owner)

In particular, seasonal variation, emerged as an important consideration in deciding how many times to carry out an assessment and when to assess. As one horse owner said:

*I’d say [welfare and welfare assessment is] seasonal isn’t it? Going into winter, coming out of winter, half way through summer, potentially. That kind of thing.*

(Leisure horse owner)

Many participants recognized that horses may face different challenges to their welfare across the seasons, for example over grazing in the summer and muddy conditions in the winter. Hockenhull and Creighton (2015), Hotchkiss, Reid, and Christley (2007) and Wylie et al. (2013b) all found that a greater proportion of horses are stabled 24/7 (kept in stables 24 hours a day without access to pasture) during the winter than in the summer, whilst Giles, Rands, Nicol, and Harris (2014) found that prevalence of obesity in outdoor living domestic horses and ponies was 27.08% at the end of winter compared to 35.41% during the summer. These research findings suggest that, as noted by our participants, welfare inputs and outputs may vary across the seasons and therefore a single assessment of equine welfare may be of limited
value. The existing protocols available for assessing equine welfare, for example that created as part of the AWIN project (AWIN, n.d) do not specifically consider assessment of seasonal variation of equine welfare inputs and outputs although the AWIN protocol could easily be applied at several points during the year to look for seasonal variation. Farm welfare assessment for assurance schemes are typically carried out on a once a year basis, although staggered assessments occur in some instances to account for seasonality. For example, The Red Tractor conducts assessments of dairy farms on an 18 month basis to account for seasonal variation (Red Tractor, n.db). Once a year or eighteen month welfare assessments within the farming industry may be a reflection of the need to balance practical constraints, for example time and labor limitations, with the desire to gather comprehensive and representative data. In developing tools for assessing welfare in equids, similar practical constraints may need to be taken into account but careful consideration is needed to ensure that any compromises do not result in unrepresentative data being gathered as a result of possible seasonal variation in welfare inputs and outputs.

The focus group participants also discussed other reasons why welfare may vary over time, for example, due to horse injury, illness and consequent human intervention:

\[
\text{In a very short space of time some horses, for example, will experience acute pain. It may even be veterinary introduced pain, dare I say, surgical pain of some sort. I mean that’s a compromise to their welfare but generally speaking we say that’s acceptable, we rationalize it, we say we’re doing it for the horses or the owners …..But then it’s when it moves on towards a more acute chronic stage, then you’re really, I think, in some difficulty. (Welfare scientist)}
\]

For some stakeholders, short term compromises of welfare were seen to be justified because of the long term benefits for the animal, and the implication was that any welfare assessment should consider both the justification for the immediate welfare compromise and the long term context. In the following extract, one of the welfare charity group participants involved
in enforcing welfare legislation discusses how they seek to understand longitudinal features of an animals’ welfare when deciding whether to take any action:

If somebody complained about the same horse and I have the owner standing there with me and I say, ‘Why’s it underweight?’ and she’s got a reason for it. I don’t know - it’s been in the vets for six weeks because it’s had a major colic operation. ‘It’s the first time it’s out; we’re just building it up again’. Then that’s not a welfare situation, is it? There’s a reason behind it. (Welfare charity worker)

Interestingly in the above extract the participant describes the scenario as “not a welfare situation”, despite the horse exhibiting features of reduced welfare, i.e. a low body condition score. Here we see how inclusion of animal based measures into welfare assessment is seen to necessitate a degree of interpretation within the assessment and that talking to the owner or caregiver of the animal may help with this interpretation.

In the current study, the need to understand the wider context and to gather information reflecting more than one point in time was one reason why talking to the owner of the horse or primary caregiver was seen as an important component of any equine welfare assessment.

As one of the welfare scientists said about horse owners: …..they can give you a lot of information and a lot of longitudinal [information].
(Welfare scientist)

Roe et al. (2011) carried out ethnographic studies of farm animal welfare assessment and found that assessors may talk to farmers about what they are seeing on farm to more fully understand the situation, especially in cases where non-compliance is suspected. In one of the “case studies” presented the assessor finds problems with the youngest of the pigs on the farm that is being assessed. The piglets are found to be “huddling….not playing or inquisitive, and appear frightened of humans”. On talking to the farmer, the assessor discovers that the piglets arrived only the night before, information that the assessor views as “important” and takes this into account in his reporting. In contrast, during a different
assessment, this time of a dairy farm, the cows are found to have “inexplicably poor body condition” and the farms certification is removed (Roe et al., 2011). Evidence from this current study suggests that those involved with equine welfare assessment, i.e. equine welfare charity field officers, take a similar approach, utilizing information about the wider context to inform their decisions. Roe et al. (2011) conclude that the acceptance of welfare assessments based on outcome measures lies in assessors correctly identifying areas where problems can be addressed and those which are beyond the control of the farmer and then dealing with this information “sensitively”. Based on findings from this current study, it is likely that a similar approach to equine welfare assessment will be valued by equine stakeholders, although clearly care needs to be taken to ensure that welfare problems are not overlooked. This approach may also help to address existing defensive attitudes towards welfare assessment, and in the following extracts, participants from our current study discuss how talking to horse owners may facilitate a fair assessment:

You need to discuss the behavior with the owner. Because it might be quiet; some horses will quite happily take your head off as you walk down the stairs. Well, that’s just the way they are. It doesn’t necessarily mean there’s something wrong with them. It doesn’t mean that it’s distressed, it’s just a miserable git. You get horses like that. (Welfare charity worker)

My mare, she had ulcers previously, so she is renowned for going to kick at her stomach, as a learnt thing. She is getting better and better, but it’s still there. So if you put the saddle on and she goes and kicks up, are you going to automatically, as a welfare thing, go, ‘Even though the saddle looks okay, there’s clearly a welfare thing because the horse kicked up,’ even if I say, ‘It’s because she had ulcers’. Do you believe me…? (Leisure horse owner)

The desire on the part of the horse owner above to “explain” their horses’ current behavior emphasizes the perceptions of welfare assessment as some form of judgement. The quote above also demonstrates a perception held by many participants that if a horse has always behaved in a particular way, or exhibited particular physical characteristics, then these may
not be indicators of a current welfare problem. Certainly in some circumstances long term features, in particular, long term behaviors may not be a reflection of current welfare status and behaviors may be learnt and emancipated from their original cause. Hothersall and Casey (2012) state that behaviors in horses caused by pain may continue after the resolution of the pain because horses learn to avoid situations where there is a risk that they will experience pain. They therefore do not learn that the situation is no longer pain inducing. As our participants articulated, talking to the owners may well elicit valuable information that may help assessors determine whether what they see reflects a current or past welfare problem for the animal, thus facilitating the welfare assessment process. It may also help to reassure owners and caregivers that the welfare of their horses is being fairly assessed. However, care should be taken as research has shown that caregivers do not always accurately assess the welfare of the horses in their care (Ireland et al., 2012, Lesimple and Hausberger, 2014) and this was noted in the current study. Whilst many stakeholders viewed owners as a valuable source of information they also saw possible problems in gathering information via owners. In particular, they saw that there was the potential for owners to try and deceive the assessors and for this reason cross validation of owner provided data was seen to be beneficial:

"You’ve got to assess what you see, and then assess what the owner tells you, so you’ve got two assessments, effectively. Going back to being completely cynical, you’ve got to determine that what the owner is telling you is correct as you understand it..." (Groom)

It is interesting to note that the participants in this current study discussed two important features, that of longitudinal enquiry and incorporation of owner perspectives, that do not appear in the AWIN horse welfare assessment protocol (AWIN, 2015). As equine welfare assessment processes develop, consideration should be given to how to incorporate what are
perceived to be very important features of equine welfare assessment in a way that is both practical and rigorous.

In the next section one final feature of the welfare assessment that our participants viewed as important, that of assessor qualities, is discussed.

The Assessor

All but one group (the welfare scientists) discussed qualities of the assessor as an important feature of the welfare assessment and the assessor was seen to need to be suitably qualified. One owner stated, if someone asked to assess their horses, they might ask:

what actually qualifies you to decide that my horse is being correctly looked after, or what you consider correctly looked after? (Leisure horse owner)

“Qualified” was seen in two distinct ways. Firstly, as a manifestation of formal skills an assessor could or should have and one veterinary surgeon questioned:

Is the welfare assessor competent to make an orthopedic assessment of a horse? Most of them will not be specialists in that sense. (Veterinary surgeon)

Secondly, experience and knowledge emerged as an important quality of the assessor and as this participant in the welfare charity group stated:

[welfare assessment] comes down to experience because I don’t think a novice can do it properly. I think you need the knowledge of the animal, you need the knowledge of being able to read people, and you need the knowledge to be able to interpret what you see. Once you’ve got that then you can really assess. Without those three pieces of knowledge you’re going to struggle. (Welfare charity worker)

Where welfare assessments are carried out for research purposes considerable effort is put into ensuring inter and intra observer reliability in relation to the measures being taken. From a welfare science perspective, this has as much, if not more to do with the “quality” of the measures and scoring criteria, than attributes of the assessors. Mullan, Edwards, Butterworth,
Whay, and Main (2011) found that when animal welfare assessors were provided with training in relation to assessing outcome measures their assessment was not confounded by their attitudes to farm animal welfare. It is perhaps because of this fundamental understanding of how existing welfare assessment measures have been devised that the welfare scientists did not put any emphasis on assessor characteristics in contrast to other groups.

One reason for emphasizing assessor qualities was that for many participants, welfare assessment involved, at least in part, a subjective, preliminary judgement of the environment, owner and horse on the part of the assessor. As one of the welfare charity participants, who was involved in welfare legislation enforcement, said of their own approaches to assessment:

"Normally on a welfare concern, within five minutes of driving on the yard and speaking to the owners without seeing any of the horses, you get a picture in your brain of what you're going to see. (Welfare charity worker)"

For some, utilizing this initial instinct was seen as a means of “short cutting” the need to collect large amounts of data and could help to focus the assessment:

"When you go and look at a yard, you walk in, and you instinctively know whether you're going to like it or not. You do make a quick judgement, and maybe it's more that, than necessarily the horse. Then going from your judgement, it's then when you start asking questions, and depending on what they say, or how little, how much, you can then go, 'My instinct was clearly completely wrong, but maybe I should keep an eye on that place. Or, my instinct was completely right'. (Groom)"

The role of “first impressions” in welfare assessment has also been noted by Roe et al. (2011) who state that “the assessment begins immediately the car pulls up” and that “impressions are a powerful component of the assessment process”.

Utilizing intuition or instinct within welfare assessments can be considered a largely heuristic approach and may be used in assessments because the alternatives are either seen to be
impossible or impractical, for example due to time constraints. Supporting this, one reason why many of the group participants emphasized assessor qualities was that they perceived that without an experienced, knowledgeable assessor, completing a welfare assessment would be hugely time consuming, especially if the protocol was designed to be used across a complex and diverse industry:

If you're producing stats .....then you will want to know which headings things fit into. The only way of doing that is possibly by having a form that covers everything. Which is going to be - that would be a book. (Welfare charity worker)

One of the major challenges presented to those developing protocols for farm animal welfare assessment has been designing protocols which are both comprehensive and time efficient (Andreasen, Wemelsfelder, Sandoe, & Forkman 2013). Roe et al. (2011) describe some of the skills that the assessors they observed were seen to have that enabled them to carry out the assessments in a time efficient manner including “skilled observation of animals in different postures”, “skim reading” and “familiarity with the tick-box form”. Those involved with developing and implementing welfare assessment protocols for the equine industry are likely to also need to balance the need for comprehensive and valid welfare assessments with practical considerations including time constraints.

It should be noted that whilst utilizing the instincts of the assessor was seen as important by our focus group participants, they also discussed potential difficulties with relying on this approach:

It’s difficult to quantify...a gut instinct........ people are different, aren’t they? I could walk into a place and have no instinct at all, but you could, and vice versa. It’s a very, very personal thing, and I think something like this, it needs to be consistent: you need to be able to prove that you have been consistent. (Leisure horse owner)
As such, where heuristic approaches are integrated into welfare assessments, by making use of assessor knowledge, care should be taken to ensure that assessors are well informed and that their “judgements” reflect what we know about best practice.

Finally, many participants believed that they, themselves, had the necessary knowledge to make the correct subjective interpretations, as this conversation taken from the professional rider focus group illustrates:

Somebody comes in and gives two up [implies using the whip on the horse]....and the horse behaves like a hooligan, slams the anchors on and you know it’s being naughty and give it two up, is that abuse? No, not in that context.... Another replies I think I could recognize the difference. (Professional riders).

The value of incorporating animal caregiver instincts and knowledge in monitoring welfare forms the basis of a welfare assessment tool developed for use in zoos (Whitham & Wielebnowski, 2009). The WelfareTrak® tool “integrates the knowledge, skills and expertise of animal caregivers’ allowing them to ‘be the “voices” for the animals under their care’. Within the assessment keepers have to rate between 10 and 15 items, for example appetite, interactions with keepers, locomotion and social behavior, on a 5-point Likert scale (poor, marginal, fair, good, and excellent). The assessment is designed to be conducted in 2-3 minutes, thus using keeper intuition to allow rapid welfare assessments which can be carried out regularly to monitor welfare over time (WelfareTrak®, n.d). Greater integration of caregiver assessments into protocols for both farm animal and other species may be beneficial and has been found to be effective at improving the welfare of working horses (Reix et al., 2015). It may result in stakeholders having a less defensive attitude to welfare assessment and Vaarst (2003) found that farmers felt it important that they could actively use, benefit from, question and discuss both the indicators used in and results from a welfare
assessment. Where farmers felt that assessment was being carried out for the benefit of “others” they were less inclined to trust those conducting the assessment. Integrating caregiver assessments also allows longitudinal data to be collected in a more resource efficient way. As with the WelfareTrak® system, utilizing caregiver assessments offers a means whereby welfare can be monitored internally by those responsible for ensuring the welfare of domestic and/or captive animals, both facilitating a different appreciation of the role of welfare assessment whilst also, if managed carefully, promoting welfare improvement. It has been noted, for example by Lesimple and Hausberger (2014) that equine caregivers may not always make accurate assessments of the welfare of the horses in their care. As such, any welfare assessment tools developed to be used by caregivers should be designed in a way that facilitates the collection of valid data but may help equine caregivers make accurate assessments of the welfare of the horses they care for. The Animal Welfare Indicators (AWIN) project has recently designed a mobile phone app, AWINHorse, based on the welfare assessment protocol for horses (Dai et al., 2015). In addition, The Donkey Sanctuary are developing a mobile phone app for recording welfare assessment data (H.R Whay, personal communication, June 2, 2016). These provide useful tools which could be utilized by equine caregivers to help them monitor the welfare of their animals.

Notes on the methodology

As the concept of welfare is far from clear cut and can be defined and understood in a number of differing ways (Fraser, 2008), the level of agreement that occurred within the groups is surprising. It was perhaps a reflection of the group compositions and that by grouping people with similar roles the amount of difference of opinion was limited in some groups. The level of agreement within most of stakeholder groups may also be reflections of the nature of the horse industry where fitting in and doing and saying what others do and say is an important cultural feature (Birke, Hockenhull, & Creighton, 2010). Therefore whilst the
methodological approach seemed to achieve its goal of reducing the influence of power relationships, it may also have resulted in limited debate and questioning. However, two of the groups, the welfare scientists, and the veterinary surgeons, showed a lesser degree of consensus in some of their discussions, although not within the themes discussed in this paper. The veterinary surgeons debated whether a high body condition score was, in itself, a welfare problem:

*Hang on, you keep on going to the future. I’m talking about at that moment. Can you say to that lady, ‘Look at what you’ve done to your horse. It is suffering’? The answer is no you can’t. All you can say is, ‘It might suffer in the future if you’re not careful.’* (Veterinary surgeon)

Whilst within the welfare scientist group, there was debate over whether allowing horses to exhibit natural behavior was a welfare need. One participant outlines “Grazing and walking as a behavior”, as important welfare needs, to which another participant responds:

*You think [grazing and walking around is] important for [a] horses’ welfare rather than [being] stood [in a stable]? ....Right, okay. I don’t know why that should be but....* (Welfare scientist)

Part of the process of studying equine welfare or equine health involves developing skills in critically evaluating evidence. It is not surprising then, that the veterinary surgeons and welfare scientists were more questioning. However, it is noteworthy that even within these groups there was a large degree of agreement in relation to the main themes discussed in this paper.

The authors aimed to recruit between three and seven participants for each focus group discussion, informed by Stewart & Shamdasani (2014). The actual focus group participant numbers ranged between three and five, which was within the desired range but at the lower end. Despite this, the group sizes still allowed for comprehensive discussion of the topics
although it is possible that had larger groups been utilized a greater range of opinions may
have been expressed.

The themes identified and discussed above were determined by the first author after
comprehensive analysis of the transcripts. These themes were cross-validated by the note-
taker who was present at all of the focus group discussions. However, no other member of
the research team analyzed the transcripts. Whilst this is not considered a vital process when
carrying out social science research the authors note that analysis by a second person may
have led to additional interpretations of the transcripts.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has shown that the purpose a welfare assessment could or does serve within the
equine industry is understood in limited and often negative terms by equine stakeholders. As
such, careful consideration needs to be taken about the framing and language used when
developing and implementing welfare assessments for use within the industry. Stakeholders
have assumed knowledge about what the main welfare problems are and where these may
occur. Industry wide assessment may be necessary to validate, address or challenge these
assumptions to ensure the recognition of all welfare problems, even those that are common
and/or perceived as normal. However, there may be a need to increase industry level
understanding of the need and value of assessing welfare across the industry and
consideration of industry level concerns should be appreciated.

The need for longitudinal data emerged as an important feature of assessing the welfare of
horses both because of seasonal variation in management and welfare and because it will
assist in making fair and accurate assessments. There is a need to consider how to balance
this with practical constraints.
Horse owners may provide valuable information which can contribute to welfare assessments and owners may be well placed to monitor the welfare of their own horses, especially considering the need for longitudinal data. Encouraging owners to carry out welfare assessments themselves may help overcome defensive attitudes to welfare assessment and may support integration of assessor intuition into the assessment process. However, there may be some problems associated with this approach, for example if owner intuition is misguided, uninformed or biased by their relationship with their animals. Consideration should be made of how best to overcome these potential difficulties, for example by providing caregivers tools to objectively assess equine welfare.

There is evidence that whilst differences may exist between the farming and equine industry similar challenges associated with welfare assessment may also exist. As developments are made in the field of welfare assessment there is likely to be value in sharing and learning from experiences across the species to continually improve the process.

References


Table One - Focus group participant profiles for each of the six focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Participant profiles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grooms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Freelance groom x2</strong>, working on a self-employed basis in a number of settings including competition yards and livery yards <strong>Event groom</strong> working for an international event rider <strong>Riding school groom</strong>, working at a large commercial riding school <strong>Racing yard groom</strong>, with 17 year experience working on racing yards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leisure horse owners</strong></td>
<td><strong>Leisure horse owner</strong> with two horses kept at a livery yard¹, one of which was retired <strong>Leisure horse loaner²</strong> who loaned a horse kept at a livery yard <strong>Leisure horse owner</strong> with one horse kept at a livery yard <strong>Leisure horse owner</strong> with two horses kept on their own land, one retired. Was running a livery yard¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional riders</strong></td>
<td><strong>International show horse rider and show judge</strong> who had judged at county events and the Horse of the Year Show in the UK and at shows abroad <strong>Event rider</strong>, competing up to 4 star³ <strong>Dressage rider</strong>, competing internationally up to Grand Prix level⁴ <strong>Show jumper</strong> who was competing in show jumping and was also a British Showjumping coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare scientists</strong></td>
<td><strong>Research Fellow</strong> with experience developing welfare assessment protocols for horses. Also a veterinary surgeon. <strong>Research Associate</strong> with a PhD in equine behavior <strong>Veterinary surgeon</strong> with a PhD in equine welfare <strong>Researcher</strong> working for a UK based equine charity with a PhD in working equid welfare assessment. Also a veterinary surgeon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare charity workers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Local authority inspector</strong>, retired and currently supporting work to develop an equine welfare assessment qualification and assisting police forces making equine welfare prosecutions. <strong>Field officer</strong> for an equine welfare charity x 2. One was previously in the army <strong>Local authority worker</strong>, health and welfare enforcer who had previously worked on an equine welfare research project <strong>Equine welfare charity</strong> founder <strong>Equine welfare charity</strong> volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Veterinary surgeons</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clinician</strong>, lecturer, columnist and endurance racing veterinary surgeon <strong>Clinician</strong>, FEI³ veterinary surgeon (endurance and eventing) <strong>Clinician</strong>, associate at a large equine specialist referral unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ A livery yard is an establishment where people can rent a stable and pasture and in some instances receive help caring for their horse in return for a fee.
² A person may borrow, sometimes at cost, a horse from another horse owner and as such is said to have a horse on loan.
³ 4 star is the highest level a horse and rider can compete at in eventing
⁴ Grand Prix is the highest level a horse and rider can compete at in dressage
⁵ FEI is the Fédération Equestre Internationale, the governing body for all Olympic equestrian disciplines.