

## **ORGANIC MEAT CONSUMERS AND THEIR AWARENESS OF ANIMAL WELFARE AS REFLECTED BY PURCHASE PREFERENCES**

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### **Abstract**

This case study presents the results of a qualitative survey amongst organic meat consumers. Their ideas about and attitudes towards animal welfare were investigated together with their purchase preferences and behaviour. The authors focused their study on a group of consumers purchasing organic lamb meat from traditional sheep breeding in the south-east region of the Czech Republic. The research deals with the characteristics of specific organic animal products, consumer willingness to pay, and awareness of animal welfare. The results of interviews suggest that a conscious concern about animal welfare is not the primary incentive for purchase. A consumer typology based on their expressed attitudes towards welfare and purchasing behaviour is presented.

**Keywords:** *ethical consumerism, organic agriculture, purchase behaviour, animal welfare, attitudes*

### **Introduction**

Fraser and Broom (1990) define animal welfare as how an animal copes with its environment. From this definition, it is clear that welfare depends upon how animals view the situation in which there are in. In order to better understand animal welfare, Webster (2009) suggests three basic questions should be asked: Does the animal live a natural life? Is it healthy and in good condition? Is the animal happy? Our paper works with the concept of the “five freedoms,” which combine various approaches to animal welfare (Fraser 2004, Webster 2009), and which, according to the Farm Animal Welfare Committee of the U.K. Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, are defined as being:

1. *Freedom from Hunger and Thirst – by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.*
2. *Freedom from Discomfort – by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.*
3. *Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease – by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.*
4. *Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.*
5. *Freedom from Fear and Distress – by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.”* (FAWC 2014).

We consider conscientious purchasing preferences to be an expression of ethical consumerism, which is a type of socially responsible consumption. Harrison et al. (2005) deal with this issue and differentiate between traditional and ethical purchasing behaviors. The traditional consumer purchases products either of the highest quality her or she can afford, or selects the cheapest product among similar products of equal quality. The ethical consumer certainly does not ignore the price and quality of products but when selecting products makes decisions based on additional criteria, which often take priority, such as environmental concerns and supporting developing countries. Ethical consumers make decisions based on their beliefs, whether they are political, religious, environmental, or social in nature. No matter their specific motivations, all ethical consumers are aware of the fact that their behavior as consumers affects the world around them. However, not everything that seems to be ethical truly is, as Harrison et al. (2005) demonstrate with the case of organic food. People

who buy organic for health reasons are not acting ethically in the true sense of the word, unlike people who buy organic because they do not want to burden the environment with pesticides. Devinney et al. (2006) discuss a similar problem as they differentiate between purchases made for the functional attributes and social attributes of a product.

Studies clearly indicate that consumer interest in animal welfare is growing (Kendall et al. 2006, Mayfield et al. 2007, Vanhonacker et al. 2010, Burton et al. 2012, Spooner et al. 2014, Eurobarometer 2005, 2007). People consider welfare to be a positive attribute of products, even though it is not necessarily the most important one. For most consumers, their own enjoyment or well-being takes precedent over animal welfare. Several questions from the Eurobarometer survey indicate that consumer behavior in this regard differs by country. Consumers from northern countries generally have a better understanding of animal welfare and are well-informed about the high level of animal welfare in their country. Consumers in Central and Eastern Europe are not well informed about welfare and many people are not particularly interested in it.

### **Materials and Methods**

The main goal of this study was to understand the attitudes of a select group of Czech consumers towards farm animal welfare. Qualitative methods were selected in order to obtain a large amount of information from a small number of individuals. The study sample was narrowed down to one particular group of consumers from the Brno area who regularly purchase certified organic lamb meat from a farm in the White Carpathian Mountains (appx. 100 km east of Brno).

An overview of participants: In total, two women and six men took part in the study. The participants ranged in age from 32 to 69. Consumer 1: Barbora, approximately 40 years old, works in public relations. She grew up both in the city and in a country and currently lives in the city. She has no pets. Consumer 2: Zdeněk, 45 years old, agricultural specialist, university teacher. He grew up and lives in the city. He has a dog. Consumer 3: Ludvík, 33 years old, works in construction. He grew up in the suburbs and now lives in the country. He has a cat. Consumer 4: Hana, 67 years old, educated in biology, now a professor of sociology, which she teaches at university. She grew up in the city and but was also in contact with the country. She now lives in the city and has a cottage with a large garden. She has a dog. Consumer 5: Karel, 69 years old, electrical engineer, astronomer, and a part-time university teacher. He grew up and lives in the city. He has no pets. Consumer 6: Jan, 32 years old, nanobiologist, works in research. He grew up in a small town and now lives in a village. He has no pets. Consumer 7: Boris, 58 years old, education in medicine, works in business. He lives in the city and has a dog. He often travels. Consumer 8: Miroslav, 60 years old, conducts research in the non-profit sector. He grew up and lives in the city. He has no pets.

Data collection - We conducted structured interviews utilizing open questions directly with each consumer. Open questions allow interviewees a large space for response. With the participants' permission, the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

The main research question is: *What attitudes does the selected group of consumers have towards farm animal welfare?*

Other research questions: *What does welfare mean to the consumer? How do consumers reflect upon the difference between conventional animal raising methods and other methods (e.g., organic, free range)? How do consumers view the influence of their purchasing behavior on welfare?*

### **Results and Discussion**

One of the aims of this study was to understand the attitudes of this group of consumers towards welfare and their purchasing behavior. All of the consumers had a certain awareness about how animals are farmed and their conditions for living. However, they often mentioned their uncertainty in this area and spoke only about what they thought as they had never visited

a farm (or visited one long ago) and do not know what they are like today. In general, people view the conditions in which chickens are raised as being particularly poor. Mayfield et al. (2007) came to the same conclusion. The most interesting part of our research was when we asked about what motivated the interviewees to purchase lamb and about their consumer behavior regarding animal products. It was interesting to discover that not all behavior that seems ethical truly is. Based on these fine nuances in the ethics of each consumer, we were able to identify several categories of consumer. Nancy Williams' (2008) concept of affected ignorance also involves ethics. We discovered an example of affected ignorance in our sample; Barbora was not interested in being informed about animal welfare. In other words, she did not want to see any "sad cows." Jan also exhibited indications of similar behavior as he thinks that consumers can do little to influence animal welfare and sees no relationship between his behavior and conditions for animals on farms. We also found elements of discordance between the original purchasing intents of consumers and their actual behavior as Carrington (2010) describes. Amongst such people, their purchasing behavior is to a certain extent automatic or they are lacking information, which most of the interviewees mentioned. Consumer awareness is key to animal welfare. Mayfield et al. (2007) and Vanhonacker et al. (2010) have demonstrated that almost 50 % of consumers do not feel they are well-informed about welfare. Most of the participants in our research also confirmed this. Restaurants could raise more awareness about this issue, as Hana mentioned in her interview. We found that there is a group of consumers who would appreciate a larger selection of organic meat and other organic products in restaurants and who would like to be informed about their options either in a brochure on the table, on the menu, or by the waitstaff.

In Great Britain, Italy, and Sweden, the influence of family and friends plays a much smaller role in people's ideas about welfare than our findings indicate (Mayfield et al. 2007). Interviewees were more affected by advice from their family and friends than by visiting a farm for example. This form of learning more about animal welfare is not very common in the Czech Republic. Foreign studies also indicate that it is often difficult to find welfare products in stores. The same is true in the Czech Republic which confirms Eurobarometer findings (2005 and 2007). Participants in our study also did not know how to find products with higher welfare standards, with the exception of organic products.

Some of the participants agreed that the promotion of organic food, and thus higher welfare products, should not only focus on health and safety issues but also issues of animal welfare. If only the "healthiness" of organic food is emphasized, not all potential consumers will be drawn to it. Many consumers refuse the health argument and in the process write off organic agriculture as a whole. Some of the participants in our study also refute the "healthiness" of these products, yet nonetheless purchase them for other reasons.

Based on the detailed study of the behavior of eight Czech consumers, we have created several categories of consumer types. Although in our research, we discussed only animal products, from the interviews certain purchase behavior trends could be identified (e.g., the tendency to reject organic products and vice versa). Most of the categories are based on what motivates the consumer. The three basic categories of consumers are determined by key dominant characteristics. We can divide consumers into three types: ethical, pragmatic, and skeptical. These types can also be combined, resulting in hybrid consumer types.

Basic types:

1. *The ethical consumer*

These consumers are sensitive to the region and country they live in, environmental problems, and to the entire planet. They are characterized by their optimism and their belief that their behavior can help them achieve what they believe in (for example, improving animal welfare, improving working conditions of farm laborers, improving the situation of local farmers, etc.) We should not however confuse optimism with naivete, as these consumers have at least a high school degree and know how to analyze information. They do not accept everything they hear or read about in the media. Hana and Zdeněk were both

examples of this type of consumer: both have university degrees and work in tertiary education. This is not an elitist category however; the ethical consumer does not need to make a great deal of money nor does he or she have to be well-educated.

### 2. *The pragmatic consumer*

Pragmatic consumers consider themselves to be the highest authority and do not recognize rules that have been set by others; they do not like to be subordinated. They use their own reasoning to determine what is important and good for them. Their needs are what drives their purchasing behavior. It may seem that such pragmatic behavior is similar to ethical behavior, but this is not the case. If consumers buy organic food only to benefit themselves, they are not behaving ethically. They may also reject organic or higher welfare products for their own rational reasons. Barbora is an example of the pragmatic consumer; she even labels herself as being pragmatic. What she takes and recognizes to be true is true to her. Barbora stated that purchasing lamb is a social event. For her, social contact is most important, and society partly forces her to change some of her attitudes.

### 3. *The skeptical consumer*

Skepticism is the main identifier of these consumers. Pure skeptics trust nothing, neither organic products nor conventional ones. They question where food comes from on both sides of the spectrum. They have a greater tendency to be skeptical about organic agriculture. This attitude may stem from negative experiences, a lack of information, etc. We did not find any skeptical consumers in our study. Nonetheless, we tried to characterize this type of consumer based on context and in order to fill out the possible consumer types.

Hybrid types:

### 4. *The comfortable consumer (ethical-pragmatic type)*

This type of consumer makes purchases that are partly ethical. Equally motivating for this type of consumer however are the momentary interests of the individual, which sometimes outweigh ethical issues. These consumers usually need a suitable opportunity or incentive for ethical consumption. They view organics and animal welfare positively and are willing to pay more for such products. However, when they are not momentarily available or they are too expensive, they will buy conventional products. They are not so strict about maintaining ethical principles. Ludvík is an example of the comfortable consumer; he likes purchasing organic products and products directly from farmers but he needs a middleman. He does not seek these products out in stores. He said he was motivated to buy lamb due to its general unavailability elsewhere and for its flavor. Here we can see the pragmatism of the comfortable consumer. How the sheep were bred was important to him, but it was a secondary issue. Miroslav is also a comfortable consumer. For him, where his meat comes from is important as he is against the conditions on factory farms. Just like Miroslav, Ludvík also believes that his choices as a consumer can affect the welfare of farm animals.

### 5. *The skeptical consumer with a tendency for ethical behavior (the ethical-skeptical type)*

This type of consumer displays signs of ethical purchasing behavior, but lacks the optimism and enthusiasm of the ethical consumer. In their stead, these consumers display distrustful or even suspicious attitudes towards organic products and organic agriculture as well as towards conventional agriculture. These consumers have had negative experiences with such products and are aware of the scandals that occasionally affect the food sector (Bánáti 2011, Kopferschmidt 2011) Boris is an example of this type of consumer. Although he is against organic food as he sees it as a marketing trick, animal welfare is important to him and is against conditions on factory farms.

### 6. *The resigned consumer (the pragmatic-skeptical type)*

Consumers belonging to this group do not take the ethical dimensions of their behavior into consideration. They have either resigned from ethical behavior, left it up to others, or pushed it somewhere into the background. Momentary desires are important for them without regard for the general environmental impact of their behavior or its impact on farm animal welfare. The skepticism of the resigned consumer means he or she rejects organic products because he

or she does not trust them, and therefore would rather choose the easily accessible products of conventional agriculture. This type of consumer does not really believe that he or she can affect the conditions farm animals are raised in by their purchasing behavior. Jan was identified as being a resigned consumer.

#### *7. The symbiotic consumer (a mix of all three basic types)*

The last mixed type of consumer is the symbiotic consumer. This type of consumer is partly able to support farm animal welfare and other environmentally friendly activities but may be skeptical about certain things (such as animal rights activists, but also about conditions on farm factories), which mainly depends on their personal benefit and how they imagine the situation which yields their pragmatism. This type of consumer is relatively complicated and variable. Karel is a typical example of the symbiotic consumer.

#### *The impact of general factors on consumer attitudes towards welfare*

A sample of eight respondents is unfortunately too small to demonstrate greater sociological correlation with how animal welfare is viewed, as studied by Kendall (2006). We also made similar findings when we asked about pets. Study participants who had pets cared more about animal welfare than those who did not have pets. The small sample size meant that no correlation between consumer behavior and whether the participants grew up in the country or the city could be determined. In order to determine this correlation, we would have had to have conducted a quantitative survey with more respondents. There certainly is, however, a relationship between how consumers view animal welfare and their educational level and profession. The less people were confronted with the environment at work, the less interest they had in animal welfare. This was clearly the case with Barbora who works in marketing and public relations and less so with Karel, an engineer, and Ludvík, a construction engineer. At the other end of the spectrum were Hana and Zdeněk whose education and current work in the environmental field influenced their positive view of animal welfare.

### **Conclusion**

The main goal of this study was to understand the attitudes of a select group of Czech consumers towards farm animal welfare and their purchasing behavior. The conceptual framework of the study included the concept of farm animal welfare and the ethical aspects of the relationship between humans and animals.

A sample of consumers who purchase lamb from the White Carpathian Mountains was selected for qualitative research. We conducted structured interviews with eight people. Most knew about animal welfare. Good living conditions were viewed predominately from a biological perspective: animals can behave naturally. The consumers did not emphasize emotional aspects of welfare. Intensive farming practices were viewed as a bad form of animal breeding and were seen as meat factories. All consumers shared the same understanding of such farms, yet this did not stop some from purchasing products from such farms. In contrast, organic farms were viewed positively from the perspective of animal welfare. Most study participants surprisingly rejected the claim that organic products are healthier, and some were even opposed to the organic label. This is something that we did not expect from ethical consumers.

Although the meat came from a farm that was certified organic, research findings indicate that this fact was not critical for consumers. We made this discovery when we examined what motivated study participants to buy lamb. We identified four groups of consumers. The first group behaved ethically. How the animals were raised, whether or not they suffered when killed, supporting local farmers, etc. were important to them. The second group of consumers included people who enjoy good meat at a good price. These people stated they purchased meat in this way because lamb is unavailable in normal stores. The third group of consumers was socially motivated. These people viewed purchasing lamb as a social event and a cultural phenomenon. A closed group of buyers certainly gave the system an air of rarity and special

social meaning. The last group included one ambivalent participant whose motivations included elements from the above two groups.

Consumers generally unconsciously identified organic products as being high welfare. Otherwise, they did not know how to identify high welfare products. Therefore, it can be assumed that an independent evaluation of animal welfare and system of certification would improve consumer orientation. Some products from intensive farms may meet some welfare requirements but today there is no way to mark products as such. During our research, some people told us that the organic label is more complex in that it takes into account several criteria and is therefore sufficient. Most study participants considered the supply of organic products as well as the information they had about welfare as being unfavorably low.

Several categories of consumers were identified based on their attitudes towards animal welfare and their purchasing behavior. We characterized consumers based on their predominant characteristics. We divided consumers into three types: ethical, pragmatic, and skeptical. These types can also be combined to produce hybrid consumer types: the comfortable consumer (the ethical-pragmatic type), the skeptical consumer with ethical tendencies (the ethical-skeptical type), and the symbiotic consumer (a mix of all three basic types). This categorization is the major finding of this study of a select group of Czech consumers.

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