

Human-animal interactions as perceived by Austrian pig farmers¹

Ika Darnhofer and **Elaine Kager**



Society expects higher levels of animal welfare, not least on farms keeping fattening pigs. Most studies on animal welfare focus on the pigs themselves, collecting data on clinical, performance-related or behavioural aspects, as well as emphasizing the role of adequate housing systems. Much less attention is given to the role of farmers, despite strong evidence that the quality of the human-animal relationship significantly impacts pigs' affective state and thus welfare.

To capture how farmers perceived their relation with their pigs and how they interact with them, semi-structured qualitative interviews were held with 15 farmers with standard housing systems. The results show that most of the interviewed farmers are aware that their behaviour affects their relation to their pigs and thus strive to ensure calm interactions, soft vocalisations, gentle handling, and slow movements to reduce fear and stress. They also strive to maintain regularity in their activities to ensure predictability for the pigs. Yet, the human-animal relationship is characterized by the tension between emotional involvement and care to ensure the pigs have a 'good life', and the awareness that ultimately the pigs are destined for slaughter. As a result, some farmers had a more instrumental view of their pigs, perceiving them mostly as a means to earn an income, whereas others viewed the pigs as akin to 'partners' emphasizing that only together could they ensure the continuity of the family farm.

The study shows that even on farms with fattening pigs where the animals spend only a relatively short time (about 3-4 months), many farmers develop an emotional connection to the pigs in their care. Openly addressing the emotional aspects of working with fattening pigs may validate farmers who care about their animals and reassure those who may be unsure whether it is 'professional' to express such emotions. Including emotional along technological and economic aspects of pig production might thus contribute to the welfare of the pigs.

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The interviews were held in the framework of
the [IBeSt](#) project



¹ Abstract of a presentation on 25 Aug. 2025 in Session 20 – Horse and farm animal welfare, behaviour, and anthrozoology, in the framework of the [76th EAAP annual meeting](#), Innsbruck, 25-29 August 2025.



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76th EAAP in Innsbruck, Session 20
25 August 2025



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Introduction

- Society expects higher levels of animal welfare
 - Yet consumers are reluctant to pay more for pork
- Most studies of animal welfare focus on the pigs themselves
 - Clinical, performance-related and behavioural aspects
 - Emphasize role of adequate housing systems
- Less attention given to role of farmers
 - Yet: studies show that the quality of human-animal relationship has impact on pigs' affective state and thus welfare
 - Very few studies on human-animal relationship on conventional pig farms
 - Conventional farmers are assumed to focus on raising technical efficiency and minimizing costs (incl. labour time)
- This study aimed at capturing how conventional farmers with standard housing systems perceived their relations with their pigs



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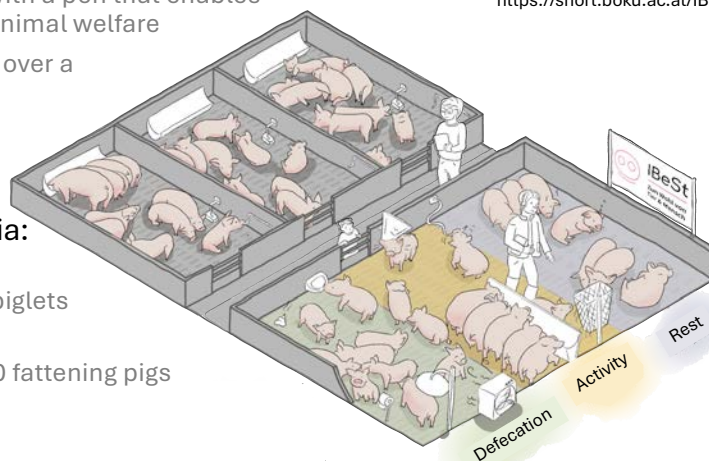
Data collection

- Semi-structured interviews on 15 conventional farms

- Part of the IBeSt Project: have adapted part of their barn to experiment with a pen that enables higher level of animal welfare
- Data collection over a two-year period

- Family farms representative for range of pig farms in Austria:

- 7 nursery farms with 150 – 750 piglets
- 8 farms with 600 – 2.300 fattening pigs



IBeSt

Zum Wohl von
Tier & Mensch

<https://short.boku.ac.at/IBeSt>



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Human-animal interactions

- The interviewed farmers are aware that their behaviour affects the relation with their pigs and manage their behaviours accordingly

- Strive to ensure soft vocalisations, calm interactions, gentle handling, and slow movements to reduce fear and stress
- Maintain regularity in their activities to ensure predictability for the pigs
- Feel that pigs recognize them (different behaviours with strangers)

- Twice daily close observation of pigs

- Look for indications of sickness, but this leads to a keen eye for pigs
- Adapting of pen: quite some trial-and-error (weather, group dynamics, ...)

- Having a trustful relationship with pigs is important

- Makes handling easier, but also ethical dimension: being a 'good' pig farmer
- Farmers dislike having to tattoo the pigs (legally mandated): feel that it breaks the bond of trust, which takes time to rebuild

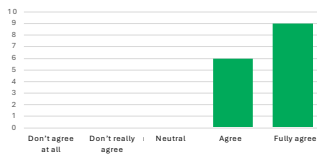


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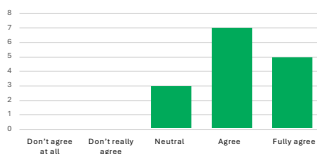
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Pigs: 'means to an end' or 'partners'?

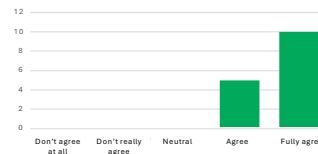
Farmers were asked to assess four statements on a 5-step Likert-scale (I do not agree at all > I fully agree)



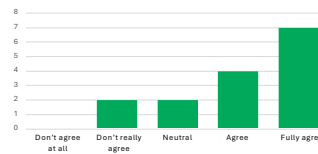
I am responsible for ensuring that my pigs have a good life



For me, pigs are more than a source of income



My pigs and I jointly contribute to the success of the farm



For me, the relationship with the pigs is a mutual exchange, a give-and-take



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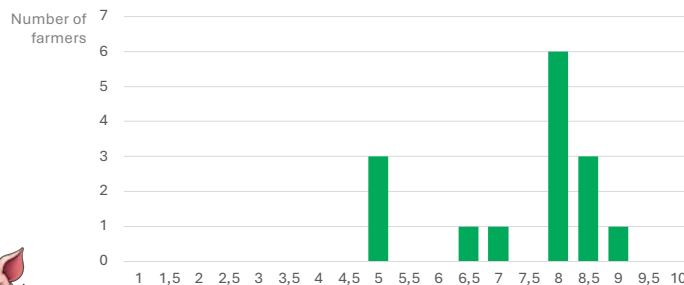
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Empathy: putting oneself in the pig's place

Willingness and capacity to empathise with pigs and to reflect one's own actions from the pigs' perspective

➤ Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10

How do you think that your pigs assess your treatment of them?



They would complain and scold me



They would praise me



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Elements of caring

- Tronto (2017) discusses four phases of care, which can be transposed to farmers:
 - **Caring about:** farmers who notice unmet needs
 - **Caring for:** once needs are identified, the farmer takes responsibility to make certain that these needs are met
 - **Caregiving:** actual caregiving work is done
 - **Care receiving:** observing the response by the pigs that have been cared for and making a judgement about it: was it sufficient, successful, complete?
- All four phases of care most marked with sick or injured animals
- All farmers ensure basic needs are met, esp. food, water, adequate climate
 - Observations in the adapted pen allowed them to become aware of other needs, e.g. play, running, socializing, differentiated use of the various areas of the pen



Tronto (2017) There is an alternative.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/239788217X14866281687583>



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Conclusion

- Even on conventional farms many farmers develop an emotional connection to the pigs in their care
 - Even if pigs spend only a short time (about 3-4 months) on the farm
 - Feel responsible for them; emotional burden if they are sick
- The human-animal relationship is characterized by a tension:
 - Emotional involvement and care, aim to ensure the pigs have a 'good life'
 - Awareness that ultimately the pigs are destined for slaughter
- Openly addressing the emotional aspects of working with pigs
 - May validate farmers who care about their animals, encourage deeper engagement with pigs needs, enabling broader range of natural behaviours
 - May reassure those who are unsure whether it is 'professional' to express such emotions
- Including emotional along technological and economic aspects of pig production might thus contribute to the welfare of pigs



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