

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 fattening pigs and how they interact with them, semi-structured qualitative interviews were held with 15 farmers with standard housing and with 28 farmers with welfare housing systems. The interviewed farmers kept between 150 and 2.000 fattening pigs. 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.

Affiliation:

BOKU University

ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at

elaine.kager@students.boku.ac.at

The interviews were held by Elaine Kager, Annabel Wagner and Zoe Köhler in the framework of the projects [IBeSt](#) and [IBeSt+](#)



IBeSt

Zum Wohl von
Tier & Mensch



IBeSt⁹
Plus

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.