The relationship between working horse welfare state and their owners’ empathy level and perception of equine pain

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Abstract

An understanding of the factors influencing the human-animal relationship is relevant in the development of welfare interventions for working equids. However, the link between the psychological attributes of animal owners, such as empathy level and pain perception, and the welfare state of working horses is yet to be studied. Here, we assessed working horse owners’ empathy, their perception of equine pain and how these relate to the welfare state of their horses. The relationship between empathy and perception of equine pain was also explored. One hundred owners of working horses were studied, along with their working horses (n = 127). Self-reported rating scales were used for measuring animal-oriented empathy, human-oriented empathy and owners’ perception of equine pain; higher scores in the three scales indicated higher levels of empathy and higher perception of equine pain. An animal welfare index based on direct measures was applied where higher scores indicate a poorer welfare state. Most of the owners had high levels of empathy towards both animals and humans and a high perception of equine pain. According to the animal welfare index, 15.7% of horses had a poor welfare state. Higher levels of empathy and equine pain perception in owners were correlated with a better animal welfare condition, with owner’s empathy level towards animals explaining over 60% of horses’ welfare. Moreover, empathy towards animals was positively correlated with human-oriented empathy and perception of equine pain. We therefore suggest that strategies oriented to improve welfare of working horses should consider education programmes aimed at promoting the development of empathy in caretakers.

Keywords: animal welfare, empathy, human-animal empathy, human-animal interactions, pain perception, working equid

Introduction

Working equids carry out essential functions for the livelihoods of many people across the world, often peripheral and invisible to others (Pritchard 2014). In many developing countries, these working animals are still the main source of power for transport of goods and people (Pritchard et al 2005), and often represent the sole source of income for their owners who depend on them for their living (Popescu & Diugan 2013). It is estimated that working equids support 600 million people worldwide, usually in poor and marginalised communities (Valette 2015); these people are affected by factors such as poverty, low social status and restricted access to resources (van Dijk 2011). Working equids owners’ limited skills, knowledge and resources have been associated with negative effects on their horses’ welfare (Tadich et al 2008). However, more recently, Lanas et al (2018) found no relationship between the welfare state of working horses and the social vulnerability of their owners. This suggests that other factors might be involved in determining the welfare state of these animals, and further study is required.

Proper understanding of the factors affecting the human-animal relationship is an essential component of any strategy intended to improve the welfare of animals and their caregivers (Wäiblinger et al 2006). Research in the livestock industry has shown that the quality of the human-animal relationship between stockpeople and their animals can limit productivity and affect the welfare state of the animals (Hemsworth 2003; Kielland et al 2010). Pritchard et al (2005) reported that the assessment of the quality of the human-animal relationship in working equids is important for establishing appropriate interventions in order to improve animal welfare. The authors argue that without a minimal degree of bonding between owners and their animals, there is little motivation to improve their welfare.