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Happy chickens lay tastier eggs: Motivations for buying free-range eggs in Australia

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Abstract

Recent public interest in so-called “ethical” food production, and in particular the welfare of intensively-housed farm animals, has been linked to an increase in sales of free-range eggs in several countries including Australia. Animal activist groups around the world have campaigned for the abolition of caged-egg production, retailers and large food companies are now sourcing less of these products, and governments in various locales have placed restrictions on caged-egg production. In addition, the recent focus on food production and preparation in popular culture including books, films, and television has made food production practices including those associated with eggs more transparent to mainstream audiences. Previous studies have examined consumers’ willingness-to-pay for free-range eggs, and community attitudes to animal welfare, but there has been little qualitative work that unpacks a key assumption that underlies much discussion of these issues, namely that free-range egg purchases are primarily or solely linked to consumers’ desires to have egg production systems changed from intensive to free-range. This paper analyses qualitative research undertaken in Australia that explores consumers’ motivations for buying free-range

(or cage-free) eggs, which was part of a larger study examining ethical foods. Qualitative analysis of focus groups and interviews involving 73 participants revealed that free-range and cage-free eggs are perceived as being better quality, more nutritious, and safer, and having better sensory characteristics, than caged eggs. In response to open-ended questions, free-range and cage-free eggs were mentioned much more frequently than free-range meats, and were described as easy to identify and affordable compared to other products with humane production claims. Several participants even had begun keeping their own hens in order to have an alternative to purchasing caged (or expensive free-range) eggs. Although caged-egg production was described by many participants as cruel, the desire to purchase free-range eggs was more often described in connection to efforts to avoid “industrialized” food than in relation to taking a stance on the issue of caged-hen welfare.

Keywords: free-range; egg production; animal welfare; consumer attitudes; ethical consumption

Introduction

There has been increasing interest in consumer perceptions of the welfare of food and fiber production animals in recent years in Europe (e.g., Boogaard, Oosting, Bock, & Wiskerke, 2011; Vanhonacker et al., 2012), the United States of America (Prickett, Norwood, & Lusk, 2010) and Australia (e.g., Coleman, Rohlf, Toukhsati, & Blache, 2015; Taylor & Signal, 2009). The publication of *Animal Machines* by Ruth Harrison in 1964 in response to the intensification of farm animal production in Europe highlighted the treatment of farm animals to a largely urban public disconnected from food production, leading to interventions by government to regulate how farm animals were treated (Woods, 2011). Recently celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver, popular books including Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), and films such as *Food, Inc.* (2008) have stimulated public interest in

“ethical” food production and consumption, including attention to avoidance of food produced from intensively-farmed animals. Retailers also have had major roles in bringing awareness of the consumption of products with ethical claims more into the mainstream (Hartleib & Jones, 2009) and have “reconceptualise[d] values by promoting particular standards or principles of judgement to apply to food decision-making” (Dixon, 2003, p. 37).

Ethical food consumerism (Ankeny, 2012) describes a set of voluntary food choices directed towards a “moral other” because of values and beliefs, and may involve avoiding foods that can be morally problematic, or choosing certain foods over others because of a perceived ethical superiority. For example, a consumer who purchases free-range eggs because they believe it is wrong to keep hens in cages is participating in an act of ethical consumerism. Ethical consumerism can be thought of as a conscious or political act, for example consumers “voting with their dollar” (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006, Willis & Schor, 2012) or “voting with their fork” (Parker, 2013); an example would be purchasing free-range eggs with the ultimate aim of eliminating caged egg production through market forces. However, the idea that people can simultaneously act as citizens and consumers has been challenged by some scholars, such as Johnston (2008) and Guthman and Brown (2016), who found that in circumstances where people are encouraged to act as citizens such as shopping at a Whole Foods Market (Johnston, 2008) or posting comments opposing the use of an agricultural chemical (Guthman & Brown, 2016) that consumerism becomes dominant (see also Ankeny, 2016 for the contrast between food citizens and consumers). A more extreme critique using a critical animal studies approach (Jenkins & Twine, 2014) contends that the concept of “food autonomy” is flawed and that consumers are not as “free” as we might think when making food choices, given dominant sociocultural norms particularly about animal consumption. Although they do not explicitly address political consumerism with regard to food, they note

that food choices, for instance whether to be vegan or consume animal products, are moral rather than lifestyle decisions.

Scholarly work on public perceptions of farm animal welfare has tended to focus on what people know about how animals are treated on farms (Coleman, 2010), what people think about farm animal welfare (Boogaard, Oosting, & Bock, 2006; Boogaard et al. 2011; Prickett, Norwood & Lusk, 2010; Vanhonacker, Van Poucke, Tuyttens, & Verbeke, 2010; Vanhonacker et al. 2012; Coleman, Jongman, Greenfield, & Hemsworth, 2016), or whether consumers are willing to pay premiums for products with ethical claims (Taylor & Signal, 2009; Chang, Lusk, & Norwood, 2010; Elbakidze & Nayga, 2012). However, we have been unable to find any attempt to unpack why people may be motivated to purchase products with animal welfare claims and to test the assumption that such decisions are acts of ethical consumerism or directly related to concerns about animal welfare, which is what this paper explores.

Farm animal welfare has received significant attention since the 1960s, when animal production was rapidly intensifying and increasing. Farm animal welfare research began with a focus on the connection between animal biology and an animal's "welfare state", with the goal of both maximizing productivity as well as addressing the welfare needs of animals in production systems (Fox 1980). More recently there have been moves to improve farm animal welfare on Europe to reflect broader social values (Bock & Buller, 2013; Miele, Blokhuis, Bennett, & Bock, 2013), although we acknowledge that there are also members of the community who do not support animal production, and others for whom it is of little concern. In the USA, responses to community concern about animal welfare appear to have been more limited (Grandin, 2014). Australia, it could be argued, lies midway between Europe and the USA in terms of community attitudes to farm animal welfare and policy responses. Although animal agriculture is important both economically and culturally,

Australia is highly urbanized with 80% of people living in the major cities (Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2015). Surveys have shown that Australians believe that farmers do a good job of looking after their animals (Cockfield & Botterill, 2012), but research also has documented low levels of agricultural knowledge among the general public (Worsley, Wang, & Ridley, 2015). The treatment of farm animals has been a recent area of focus for activist groups such as Animals Australia. In 2011, a documentary on a prominent national current affairs program showed graphic footage of Australian cattle being mistreated in Indonesian abattoirs (Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2013). The resulting public outrage prompted the Australian government to cease the live export trade until welfare standards were improved. Eggs have become increasingly prominent in public discussions of farm animal welfare in Australia. The Animals Australia “No way to treat a lady” campaign, targeting caged-egg production, featured local celebrities and used television and billboard advertising to encourage people not to buy eggs produced using caged hens (<http://www.animalsaustralia.org/no-way-to-treat-a-lady>). Other prominent campaigns have been aimed at the removal of intensive housing in the pig industry.

Until very recently (March 2016) (Han, 2016) there was no legally enforceable standard for eggs sold as “free-range”. At the time that this research was performed, labels such as “free-range” could be used to describe a range of production systems where animals have access to the outdoors, and “cage-free” could include barn production systems with no access to the outdoors (Parker, Brunswick, & Kotey, 2013). Prior to the recent ruling, the only recourse that consumers or groups representing them could have was via challenge by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission as misleading labelling or advertising; however with no legal standard, it was largely up to the consumer to interpret these claims (Bray & Ankeny, 2015). Some critics contend that the new definition of “free range” is so liberal, given the number of hens permitted per hectare, that it still fails to satisfy expectations

(Parker & Costa, 2016), and hence consumers should seek out additional information before purchasing egg products (Day, 2016).

The findings presented in this paper focus on egg products, and were part of a larger project that aimed to examine Australians' understandings of "ethical" food choices, and to explore the frameworks that people use to make decisions about what foodstuffs to purchase in light of their own understandings of what makes one type of food "better" than another. As often occurs with qualitative research, participants sometimes take their responses into unexpected domains or emphasize particular issues much more than researchers might have anticipated. In this study, we found that decisions to purchase (or avoid) egg products with animal welfare claims dominated conversations about humane animal production practices, although participants infrequently mentioned favoring free-range chicken meat, dolphin-safe tuna, grass-fed beef, and sow stall-free pork, among other food products perceived as "better". When participants were asked if there were any products that they avoided for ethical reasons or because of how that product might affect others, responses relating to animals included products containing palm oil, veal, and halal meat in addition to cage eggs.

Hence we specifically focus in this paper on why people were motivated to purchase certain types of egg products and in what ways they were perceived to be preferable to their "conventionally" produced counterparts. We were particularly interested in whether participants spontaneously offered explanations of their purchasing decisions in terms of ethical consumption or whether there were other factors associated with purchasing choices. We also sought to have participants articulate their reasoning behind the explanations that they provided, including factors such as knowledge of and trust in egg production systems. Finally, we sought to ascertain whether there were barriers to consumers making purchasing decisions that aligned with their values, for example price.

Method

This research was approved by the University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2012-054) and conducted according to Australian national guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007). Our research took place in Adelaide, the capital city of the state of South Australia (population of approximately 1.2 million) with a large urban area surrounded by a number of agricultural regions.

Consistent with qualitative approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), we used focus groups and interviews to explore people's understandings of and motivations to buy food products including those which explicitly make ethical claims or which they considered to be ethical products. Four focus groups including a total of 31 people took place in 2014. Participants (demographics provided below) were recruited through community announcements, newsletters, social media announcements, and flyers distributed at public events. Our focus groups lasted for approximately one hour and used semi-scripted, open-ended prompts that allowed participants to address the questions posed, explore the reasoning underlying their responses, and connect these understandings to other food practices as well as broader social and ethical issues and concerns. Participants were asked to reflect on their regular food purchases and to identify anything that they thought of as being locally-produced, organic, free from genetic modification, or produced in a way that promoted good animal welfare. They then were asked to explain why they purchased the particular items which they identified. In addition, participants were asked whether there was anything they avoided purchasing for ethical reasons. In this paper, we only report discussions directly related to animal welfare and eggs.

In addition to focus groups, we held 42 interviews at two suburban shopping centers in areas frequented by those of lower socio-economic status (based on postcodes and diverse ethnicities) to ensure that we were able to capture a range of views. These ‘mall intercepts’ (Bush & Hair, 1985) involved inviting members of the general public at random to participate in our research. This methodology was utilized because we had some difficulties recruiting those from lower socio-economic groups for focus groups, and had the added advantage that people often were going to or from the grocery store when interviewed, making the issues under discussion of immediate relevance. These interviews were based on a script that was modified from that used in the focus groups (i.e., they included discussion of other ‘ethical’ categories in addition to animal welfare) to allow exploration of the issues in a shorter time frame (approximately 15-20 minutes) whilst still allowing participants to explore the reasoning behind their answers in dialogue with the interviewer.

Of the 73 total participants in the research, 70 per cent were women. Age was distributed evenly between 18-24 and 65 plus age groups, with the lowest represented group being 35-44 (n=8) and the highest represented group being 55-64 (n=16). Fifty five per cent were married or in a defacto relationship, 68 per cent had children, and 54 per cent were not currently working which was also reflected in the high proportion (51 per cent) of low income earners (indicating that they had a household income of less than AUD50,000 per year). Seventy five per cent lived in inner metropolitan areas based on residential postcodes and Australian Standard Geographical Classification system. The educational profile of the participants was mixed: 29 per cent had completed high school only, 22 per cent had a vocational qualification, 22 per cent had completed a University degree and 16 per cent had postgraduate qualifications, and 23 per cent were currently studying either full or part time.

The focus group and interview discussions were recorded digitally, transcribed, and anonymized, and checked for accuracy against hand-recorded notes taken by one of the

researchers. The transcripts were treated as rich, narrative texts, and analysis was performed by one researcher coding the transcripts for major themes emerging from the data, similar to the “open coding” method described by Corbin and Strauss (1990), using a general inductive approach. Validity was checked by the second researcher by comparing these themes to those identified independently by her in the transcripts, and coding for consistency across the themes.

Results

Motivations for purchasing/eating free-range and cage-free eggs

A strong theme that emerged from the data about motivating factors for purchasing and/or eating free-range or cage-free eggs was that participants associated these types of eggs with superior quality in comparison to their intensively-produced counterparts. Quality was mentioned much more readily as a motivating factor for purchase rather than concerns for hen welfare. This finding highlights the contradictions present in the consumer/citizen discourse highlighted by Johnston (2008) and in particular suggests that the behavior of these consumers is directed more towards themselves, rather than the moral Other (such as non-human animals, in this case hens). Participants talked about the superior sensory characteristics of free-range eggs, in particular their taste and yolk color, and tended to attribute these characteristics to the animal’s “more natural” diet (to be discussed in more detail below), as these quotes illustrate:

Researcher: And why do you buy [free-range eggs]?

Christine: Because the yolks are better.

Researcher: The yolks are better?

Christine: They're yellower.

Researcher: Okay and so [you buy them] less because of the way the chickens [are kept] and more because of the taste?

Christine: The different diet, the different diet.

Researcher: Oh the different diet that they have you think makes the better egg?

Christine: Oh I think so. Well they tend to be a bit more yellow. They're eating more natural stuff.

Julie: Oh I always like to buy free range eggs, yes.

Researcher: And why do you prefer free range?

Julie: Because they've got a much better color. And I'm originally a farm girl where our chooks used to range outside.

Researcher: And so you like the color?

Julie: Yeah and I think they've got a better taste.

Free-range eggs also were said to provide greater nutritional benefits than their conventionally produced counterparts. Leaving aside the possibility that these products in fact may have superior attributes over caged-eggs (Hammershøj & Steinfeldt, 2015), we suggest that there seem to be other critical factors influencing the association between egg production system and quality. First, as it is highly unlikely that many participants have seen contemporary commercial egg production first hand, the main source of information at the point of purchase for most consumers about the production system would be the label. Given the number of terms used to describe production systems on labels, our participants appear to be using these labels as 'proxies' for categorizing products according to the binary of 'good' and 'bad' (Eden, 2011). However the emphasis placed on superior sensory characteristics

seems to suggest that our participants also are making an implicit association between free-range and a better, healthier product, and this tendency likely is a result of a “halo effect,” when the evaluation of one attribute strongly influences another (Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013). The label itself may also influence perceptions of taste; it has been shown that people rate animal products labeled with ‘humane’ as tastier than those with other labels (Anderson & Barrett, 2016).

The hen’s diet was very important to our participants, and was used to explain how caged egg production was ‘not natural’ in comparison to other production systems more readily than freedom to roam or other behaviours. By their accounts, birds in free-range systems had more natural or better diets (as noted in the quotes above) mostly because of what they were thought *not* to be eating, specifically “chemicals” such as hormones and antibiotics. In addition, participants described hens in cages as being ‘force fed’ substances that hens would not choose themselves; however these substances were often described as unknown, at least in comparison with feed available in free-range systems:

Meera: I think it’s tasteful [sic] and less chemicals for the kids. In the cage we don’t know what they feed them. They said they feed chemicals. I did some research about that. So the kids, they’re very fussy and I’m very fussy too. I smell [the food] and things like that.

Tony: Well because it’s more fresh ...it’s a natural way [for] the chickens when they have their diet and naturally it comes out.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the participants in our study described caged egg production as ‘unnatural’ when compared to free-range; however it is the focus on animal diets that appears to be a novel finding with respect to preferences for non-caged eggs. Confinement is seen to

restrict natural behaviours, but in particular it is seen to prevent the hens from consuming a ‘natural’ diet. A general preference for ‘natural’ foods, where natural relates to process of production more than content (Rozin, 2005), has been well documented, particularly in relation to genetically-modified (GM) foods (Rozin, Fischler, & Shields-Argelès, 2012, Mielby, Sandøe, & Lassen, 2013). We suggest that is the perceived role of “additives” in the hen’s diet that is the main driver in our participants’ descriptions of non-caged and free-range eggs as ‘natural’. This interpretation echoes the findings of Rozin (2005) and Rozin, Fischler and Shields-Argelès (2009), although we have identified no studies that specifically examine perceptions of egg-production methods. In addition based on our participants’ responses (for example, see the comment by Daniel later in this paper), we suggest that disgust, which has been found to influence food purity attitudes with respect to GM foods (Clifford & Wendell, 2016), also is closely aligned with preferences for non-caged eggs.

While some participants made specific links to substances in the hen’s diet and their own (or family members’) health, other participants made links between animal well-being and their own health:

Researcher: And so is the main reason why you buy those things [is] because of the way the animals are treated or is it also because you prefer those products?

Karen: Well the health benefit goes further. If you haven’t got an animal pumped up full of chemicals, you’re not ingesting those chemicals in a different form so it’s what’s better for the animal is better for me. Less stress on the animal because I always believe if the animal’s stressed, you’re going to eat stressed food, so it’s not going to be as healthy.

Marilyn I’d buy free-range eggs not the caged eggs any day, I think they are an excellent source of nutrition and I think that in, well as far as the freshness and the

quality, I think that's very well regulated and I particularly like the eggs that you get with the little smiley face stamp on them.

Researcher: Why?

Marilyn: Because it makes you feel better ... Happy egg, happy chicken.

The idea that “what is better for the animal is better for me” and that non-caged eggs were better for people to eat was thought to be obvious by our participants, though this conclusion was typically based on limited and subjective evidence. These associations between animal diet and wellbeing and egg quality, and the obviousness attributed to them, suggest that the participants felt that these factors affect the health of people who consume eggs from animals produced under intensive or conventional conditions in a ‘you are what you eat’ manner.

Both of the quotes above illustrate what could be interpreted as ‘magical thinking’ in particular the laws of contagion (in the case of the transmission of stress) and similarity (in the case of the happy face stamp being interpreted as both happy egg and chicken) described by Rozin, Millman and Nemeroff (1986). Magical thinking has been explored in relation to GM and organic food (Saher, Lindeman, & Koivisto Hursti, 2006) and warrants further examination in relation to animal products.

Eggs compared with other animal products

Analysis of participants’ responses reveals four key factors that help to explain the dominance of discussion of free-range eggs over other products with animal welfare claims, despite our study asking generic questions about ethics in relation to animal products. First, there were high levels of awareness about the use of cages in egg production, which participants thought was undesirable. Participants mentioned recent advertisements by

activist groups as well as documentaries and the activities of celebrity chefs as sources of information:

Debra: The eggs...I prefer free-range because I watched this documentary on chickens and I've seen people that go, and I'm not being mean or stupid but apparently there was this doctor in England that did a test, I watched it, I couldn't believe it, free-range, too much chicken that you eat sending people literally crazy because the chickens aren't walking around in the field doing natural things – now because of Jamie Oliver and all the stuff he's been doing they stopped the caged stuff, they've slowed it down and they're trying now going back to the old-fashioned ways of no more sows in pens, they're doing free-range, everything's going back to the old-fashioned ways.

Second, participants compared free-range eggs to other products in their explanations, typically mentioning clearer labelling and prominent positioning within the supermarket as contributing to purchases of free-range eggs as opposed to other animal welfare related products. Free-range chicken meat was often noted to have unclear labelling and limited obvious benefits as compared with the conventional product, especially given the attached price premium:

Gary: That's because everywhere we go they've all got free range written on the boxes ... and price has got a lot to do with it too.

Researcher: And so do you look at the same sorts of things, free-range chicken for example?

Lauren: No, not so much, it seems really silly just to do it for eggs but not so much because I feel like it's not as easily packaged as the clear labels of caged and free-range.

Researcher: Yes, so eggs are really easy to pick, harder with meat?

Lauren: Yeah.

...

Lauren: Because the only thing yeah I associate [with] how the animal is treated is eggs because it's the most easy to see, so yeah.

Third, for many respondents (including one above who also mentioned labelling), the price difference between caged eggs and other products was perceived to be minimal enough that even those from lower socio-economic groups could purchase free-range despite the higher price. Participants seemed more willing to pay the additional price, estimated elsewhere to be approximately AUD0.30 per 100 grams extra (AUD1.80 extra for a dozen large eggs) on average for free-range eggs (G. Mills 2016, personal communication [email], 17 April), whereas meat was already an expensive item; thus meat with animal welfare claims was considered too pricey:

Amy: I won't buy caged eggs. I prefer free range or barn eggs.

Researcher: And why is that?

Amy: I don't like the idea of chickens being held in cages and forced to lay eggs for a living.

Researcher: So even with the price point, because they're usually a bit more expensive?

Amy: Yeah, I will look for the – I'll be willing to spend the extra money to buy eggs that aren't caged.

Researcher: So is buying free-range important to you?

Lauren: Yeah.

Researcher: Why?

Lauren: I am very [against] like animal cruelty and stuff like that, I would much rather spend the extra three or four dollars and know that the eggs are coming from chickens and hens who obviously are more looked after rather than caged hens, I just, I feel if I don't buy off them and if I can [make] other people to not buy off them, then they'll stop caging chickens.

Finally, because small numbers of hens for egg production now can be legally kept even in city locales, there has been a recent increase in “backyard chooks” in many Australian cities. Thus some participants described preferring eggs from their own hens or sourcing them from friends or family, and described these as “free-range”:

Karen: We're also looking at doing our own garden, starting up our own garden and things like that and just bought some chooks and they're definitely free range.

They're out there, out by the back door, out by the lounge room.

Helen: I've solved the egg problem, I go out and just take them from underneath my chooks ... having chooks and that's the big new revolution, a lot of people, it's just, it's just gorgeous.

Jason: Actually I get, my mate's chickens occasionally overlay, and he'll give me a dozen and they just taste so different from what we get and we're going “this is how it

used to taste yeah” because they’re not being mass produced ... they eat the bugs and things like that and it’s a more richer [sic], creamier taste.

According to their accounts, ideas related to ethical consumption were influencing the purchasing behaviors of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; this finding is striking, given that price often is the dominant consideration for these consumers when purchasing food, as it reflects how deeply these ideas have penetrated throughout the community, particularly in urban areas. This finding echoes those of Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney (2011) that while people with lower incomes may engage less with what they describe as the “dominant ethical eating repertoire,” they are not “unconcerned with the moral quandaries surrounding food choices” (312). For several participants in our study, having their own hens, or getting eggs from family and friends with hens or access to them, were ways to get around the costs associated with free-range eggs and still allow them to consume what they perceived as “good” food.

Information and trust

Increasing public concern about animal welfare in Australia is often linked with the so-called “urban-rural divide,” referring to the distance between food producers and consumers resulting in a lack of trust and knowledge in food production (Meyer, Coveney, Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012). However, eggs provide an interesting counterexample, given increasing numbers of small urban flocks which allow even urban dwellers more direct contact with poultry, and their rearing conditions and behaviors. Our participants talked about backyard egg production as a way to control “unknowns,” particularly about what hens were being fed, and hence reduce the risks to which they and their families were exposed. In addition, having one’s own hens was spoken about as a way of knowing about good farm

animal welfare. Participants who had poultry as pets in the past or who currently kept small numbers of hens for household egg production used their personal knowledge to justify their claims that intensive production was cruel and “disgusting”:

Daniel: Yeah and I guess I’ve always had chickens as pets.

Researcher: So you pay attention to chicken?

Daniel: Yeah. I know how disgusting it is. Like with cows it’s not as bad but with chickens, it’s like you see how cooped up they are, so I don’t like that at all. I’d rather give them a little bit more space.

Backyard “chooks” may be more appropriately considered as pets than production animals (Elkhoraihi, Blatchford, Pitesky, & Mench, 2014), given their physical proximity to their owners as well as the resulting relationships, thus supporting a range of different values and associations than would typical food production animals; thus this topic warrants further investigation particularly given the rapid increase in the numbers of people keeping such animals in Australian cities.

Other participants spoke about people they knew as providing information about animal farming, growing up on farms, or visiting relatives’ farms as children, or as previously noted, having poultry at home. This type of perceived personal proximity to animal production and the knowledge resulting from it was used to explain both how animals should be kept and what kind of products should be avoided:

Researcher: Yeah. Are those sorts of things important to you, free-range?

Andrea: Yes.

Andrea: Because as a child I grew up on a farm and it was a free-range farm, this was in Ireland, my grandparents, and I’ve seen the other way things ... I’ve seen it as a child, so it is important to me.

The relationship between trust and risk reduction is characteristic of many contemporary consumer interactions, particularly in highly risk adverse environments such as ours (Lupton, 1999). Trust was unsurprisingly extended to family and friends, but butchers also were seen as important sources of information on the provenance of particular goods and as such were seen as a preferred place to buy both meat and eggs:

Suzanne: I buy [free-range eggs] from the butcher because I know that he has them delivered down from Clare [an agricultural area north of Adelaide] ... I often ask him, like just to reassure myself [that] the chickens are still free-range chicken.

However, given that there was infrequent discussion of additional information contained on the label such as stocking densities or voluntary certification, it seems that for most participants, basic labels provided enough information to enable them to choose one product over another (free range/cage-free over caged eggs) at the point of purchase. Despite this, many participants were skeptical of the labels and some had even attempted to verify the claims made by checking the companies' websites for details about conditions:

Researcher: Okay and when you for example buy the free-range eggs and so on, how do you know that they are in fact free-range?

Kate: I trust the box. Occasionally I'll Google it and find out if there's anything on the internet, pictures of the premises – I have done that before.

Conclusion

Our findings show that there is a strong link between free-range (or cage-free) eggs and perceptions of quality that is motivating people to purchase these products, even though they are more expensive. More importantly, such motivations appear to be playing much greater

roles among these consumers than considerations about animal welfare. There were high levels of awareness of caged-egg production compared to methods associated with other animal products such as meat, and strongly-held perceptions that caged-egg production is ‘wrong,’ unnatural, and even disgusting, with diet and confinement being key (negative) aspects of conventional intensive production mentioned by our participants. However, these were only cited as secondary reasons why participants were buying free-range eggs, as their main focus was on quality. Hence for those interested in promoting animal welfare, it is critical to note that purchasing preferences alone may not indicate increasing support for humane production processes. Instead, it is critical to engage with consumers around values underlying their preferences in order to better understand evolving understandings of various ethical food categories.

The idea of animal “happiness,” or at least emotional states of non-human animals, is increasingly becoming an important area of animal welfare science as well as gaining prominence in the marketing of animal products. Miele (2011) suggests that the “invention” of the “happy chicken” is both “ambivalent and precarious” because happiness is presented as being a factor contributing to better-tasting food; however many aspects of animals’ lives are not covered by welfare claims on food. Our empirical research concurs, as our participants largely viewed the happiness of the chicken as ‘good’ because of its influence on the eggs produced by them, rather than as “good for the chicken” as such.

The idea that free-range or cage-free production systems are better for hens was not questioned or critiqued by the participants in our study, despite the presence of factors that can affect animal welfare in these systems, as it was not seen by them as central to their purchasing decisions. However, this reasoning poses a clear challenge for advocates of ethical or political consumerism, which ideally involves engagement and consideration of the issues involved and willingness to pay more for a product that involves the least harm to

“others,” in this case the hen. Critiques of the “industrialization” of free-range egg production (Parker & Costa, 2016) and the mainstreaming of “alternative” food movements more generally (Guthman, 2007) have highlighted various problems associated with harnessing consumer power. It could be argued that if perceptions of quality drive consumption of products that ultimately generate better welfare for laying hens, then a lack of engagement with ethical issues in egg production on the part of consumers may not matter. However, as highlighted by Parker and Costa (2016) and Miele (2011), ethical and animal welfare issues are not absent in free-range systems. In addition, if increasing consumption of free-range and cage-free eggs (along with other products with animal welfare claims) is being viewed by industry and government as an indicator of community concern for farm animal welfare, then estimates about the levels of concern, and resulting shifts in policy and/or production methods, may be based on false assumptions.

Overall, we contend that purchasing free-range or cage-free eggs was not considered to be an act of political consumerism with respect to farm animal welfare by most of our participants. However, the perception that caged-egg production was in various senses ‘bad’ suggests that, as citizens, the participants in our study are not supportive of intensive egg production. More research is needed to understand and unpack community sentiments and explore whether policy changes either with regard to production methods or labelling, even beyond recent regulatory changes, would be supported. What this study does reveal is that even within the “ethical consumption” domain, purchasing decisions are complex and include a range of factors that operate outside what most would strictly consider to be “ethical” considerations.

Notes

AUD47,944 is the mean of the second quintile for annual gross income in Australia based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015).

The term “chook” is Australian slang for a chicken.

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Conflicts of Interest

We do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

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