

ANIMAL SENTIENCE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON ANIMAL FEELING

Hanlon, Alison (2019) *Sheep are sentient, but not identical*. *Animal Sentience* 25(41)

DOI: 10.51291/2377-7478.1497



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Sheep are sentient, but not identical

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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Abstract: Marino & Merskin (M&M) provide a timely reminder that sheep have advanced cognitive abilities, but do we still have to provide evidence to justify animal sentience? In the EU, regulations are designed to support farm animal welfare. Whilst the regulations are imperfect, they do emphasize behavioural needs and other concepts relevant to sentience. The persistence of sheep welfare issues such as lamb mortality indicates that regulations may not be achieving their desired goal. We can quibble about the science described by M&M yet reach the same conclusion: sheep (lambs, ewes and rams) are not all identical, but they are all sentient.

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Old Chestnuts. On first reading Marino & Merskin (2019) (M&M), Bentham's famous questions (*The question is not: "Can they reason?" nor "Can they talk?" but: "Can they suffer?"*) came to mind, just as they did for commentators **Palmer & Sandøe** (2019). Do we still have to provide evidence to justify animal sentience?

Animal Protection Laws & Animal Sentience. Context matters and there are key differences between the protection of farm animals in the European Union (EU) and the USA. In the EU, animal sentience has received recognition in two treaties: The Treaty of Amsterdam (1999), "... *improved protection and respect for the welfare of animals as sentient beings ...*" and the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), "... *since animals are sentient beings, pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals ...*". Both EU directives (applicable to all member states) and national laws such as the Animal Health and Welfare Act, 2013, in Ireland, are based on utilitarian principles to support animal welfare. Our laws have progressed to emphasize behavioral and physiological needs in addition to acts of omission (failure to provide, for example, access to appropriate food and clean water) and acts of commission (willful or intentional neglect and cruelty). Whilst utility presents a conflict with animal sentience, because it permits practices that infringe on animal rights, the legal framework is improving, for example, advocating a "duty of care" approach and an onus to avoid unnecessary or unreasonable suffering. Concepts and assessment of animal welfare are also evolving to reflect increased zoocentrism in society (Hanlon & Magalhães-Sant'Ana 2014) and a greater awareness of animal sentience such as quality of life and life worth living.

The Semantics of “Sheep”. M&M and several subsequent commentaries discuss the semantic use of “sheep” as a collective term that fails to recognize the individual. It also fails to recognize age and gender! Not all sheep are identical — and implications for the health and wellbeing of sheep in animal agriculture vary for ewes, rams and lambs (Phythian et al. 2011).

Diversity of Sheep Farming Systems. Sheep farming covers a diversity of production systems in the UK and Ireland, ranging from extensive — such as hill farming — to lowland production systems. Housing may be on a seasonal basis, such as with ewes being housed at lambing, or it may be continuous. Extensive systems are perceived to be more natural, because sheep are able to form natural social groups and to perform natural patterns of behavior, but naturalness does not guarantee good welfare. For example, sheep kept in extensive production systems may be at greater risk of predation; there can also be thermal discomfort if there is no natural shade or shelter. They may not be monitored as frequently as lowland or housed sheep, and therefore it may take longer to identify pain, injury and disease. Of course, there are also many limitations of intensive production systems for animal welfare.

Research Lacking on Sheep Welfare. Within the context of recent research on farm animal welfare, sheep have not ranked highly. There have been numerous studies on lamb survival, yet lamb mortality has remained at approximately 15% in some countries for four decades (Dwyer et al. 2016). There are many possible explanations for a dearth of research on sheep welfare such as a societal perception that sheep live natural lives outdoors or a failure to recognise the worth and sentience of sheep.

Conclusion. The overview provided by M&M is a timely reminder that sheep have advanced cognitive abilities. Regulations within the European Union recognise animal sentience, but the on-farm evidence suggests that meaningful improvements are required to address avoidable suffering. We can quibble about the science described by M&M (e.g., application of anthropocentric mirror tests), but we reach the same conclusion: all sheep — lambs, ewes and rams — are sentient.

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