

Sociological Study of Animal Genomics and Key Findings

Part of the EADGENE project consists of a sociological study into consumer perception of animal disease genomics. Animal disease genomics may seem to be a subject far removed from the general public – nevertheless it includes the area of food, animals, genes and health. These are all subjects of public interest. Values underlying this interest include perceptions of safety, trust, need, quality, health, animal welfare, experimentation, and care for a sustainable society and natural balance.

This article summarises the results of interviews with consumers in six study countries: UK, France, NL, Italy, Spain and Norway. Although, this pilot study is based on relatively few interviews - and therefore provides indicators rather than a definitive analysis - a first impression can be given.

In principle, it is accepted that humans use animals, selecting them for breeding and production purposes. Discussing this subject with the general public shows that people, for instance, link the subject with moral issues and their own health. Attitudes towards applied animal biotechnologies, including animal genomics, depend closely on the research goal. For example, the majority of the interviewees feel totally comfortable with using 'new genetic tools' on animals for medical purposes, but not in case of cosmetic purposes.

The average person wonders whether research on animal genomics for food production purposes is necessary. In the back of their mind people always make a link to their own health – creating a medical impact. Therefore, the public prefers regulation and control of gene-related research by independent institutions, rather than by scientists, or commercial bodies, in order to ensure the ethics of procedures. The average person feels uncomfortable about the idea of animals being used as 'surrogate humans' for medical purposes.

Public concerns regarding animal genomics are an integral part of widespread general "mistrust" regarding institutions being responsible for ensuring acceptable (safe, moral) applications of the new technologies. The terms "common interest" "transparency" in procedures, and "biodiversity", are frequently used in statements, and announcements of BSE and other crises.

Not all people react in the same way. Differences in attitude were recognised in this pilot study, and can be outlined as follows:

- Relative acceptability (vs. mistrust) of animal genomics within and across study countries is mostly related to the level of education (rather than social class), gender and age (31-45 vs. 18-30 and 45+).
- Variation in perception between study countries is mostly related to:
 - Power concerns in Farm Management: more extensive companies vs. local farms (France, Italy)
 - Animal Welfare Concerns: Animals mainly as production animals vs. Animals focussed on moral aspects (UK, NL, Norway, Spain)
 - Political and Ethical Concerns: Elite Animals vs. Right to Live for All (UK, France, Spain)