



Alternative visions of “ethical” dairying: changing entanglements with calves, cows and care

Merisa S. Thompson¹

Accepted: 13 October 2022 / Published online: 10 November 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Few sectors are more ethically contentious than dairy, with debates tending to be polarised between “intensification” and “abolitionist” narratives which often drown out alternative voices operating in-between. This paper examines the marginal spaces occupied by a group of farmers in the United Kingdom who are attempting to move towards what they see as “more ethical” dairying. Drawing on findings from ethnographic research on five farms which have adopted “cow-calf contact rearing”—which focuses on keeping calves with their mothers longer, in opposition to conventional practices of removing them shortly after birth—it asks what values underpin this alternative approach, and how and why “ethical” dairies seek to dairy ethically. To do this, it draws on a feminist epistemology and methodology that sees ethics as situated and contextual, and finds an “ethics of care” to be central to changing entanglements between humans and nonhuman animals. Instead of casting dairy as either “good” or “bad”, it explores the activities of farms which are trying to move towards what they perceive to be “better”, and draws three conclusions: (a) “ethical” dairying demonstrates a heterogeneity of dairy practices which are grounded in “care” and are happening between narrative extremes of intensification versus abolition; (b) although this practice may be, and could be, commodified, farmers are primarily guided by strong ideological principles and influenced by affective and empathetic “entanglements” with cows and calves, the agency of bovines themselves, and their social and ecological environment; and (c) “cow-calf contact rearing” represents a significant shift from a focus on the broader welfare environment towards centring the quality of individual cows’ lives. Ultimately, the paper argues that we should pay greater attention to alternative economies built on an “ethics of care” when envisaging new sustainable food and agricultural systems.

Keywords Food ethics · Gender · Feminist ethics of care · Dairy · Cow-calf contact rearing · Alternative food systems

Over the past 30 years, an explosion in public discourse on food ethics has been accompanied by increasing calls by academics and policy-makers to pay more attention to their importance in envisioning new systems of sustainable food and agriculture (Thompson 2015; Horton 2017; Goodman et al. 2010; Kirwan et al. 2017; iPES 2018; Brunori et al. 2019; Thompson et al. 2020). There are perhaps few sectors more ethically contentious than dairy. Its increasing intensification has been linked to declining farmer livelihoods, climate change, biodiversity loss, overuse of land and water, pollution, and issues of animal welfare and human

health (FAO 2006; Garnett et al. 2017). However, despite this, globally, production and consumption continue to grow. At one end of the spectrum, the industrial livestock sector remains driven by the pursuit of productivity, efficiency, and profit, and its ongoing expansion is justified by calls to feed the “nine billion”. At the other end, where abolitionism predominates, the public sphere is awash with narratives of “Dairy is Scary” and “Humane Milk is a Myth”.¹ International actors also continue to reproduce conflicting policy approaches: for example, the FAO has advocated greater intensification to reduce GHGs, whilst UNCTAD

¹ These are key narratives used in campaigns by two leading vegan charities: Viva! and Go Vegan World.

✉ Merisa S. Thompson
m.s.thompson@bham.ac.uk

¹ International Development Department (IDD), University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

has promoted reduced production and consumption (Emel and Neo 2015). There is also a tension between discourses in the global North and South as the livelihoods and basic food security of many in the latter continue to rely heavily upon livestock farming (FAO 2019). It is evident, therefore, that we exist in a time of contradictory and competing narratives and value claims with regards to the future of dairy.

However, these narrative extremes—i.e. between those favouring intensification and those favouring abolition—can often drown out analysis of the activities of others attempting to do dairy differently. These relatively marginal spaces are interesting precisely because they are different, in which actors are seeking to move towards more ethical and sustainable practices, thereby developing new types of relations between humans and nonhuman animals. Ethical and sustainability considerations are, though, not clear-cut. As Sandler (2015, p. 1) suggests, controversies abound over what we should eat, where it should come from and how it should be grown, therefore “it is no surprise... that food is contested”. Global food production and consumption is predicated on balancing multiple ethical goods—farmer livelihoods, the environment, animal welfare and human health—which are in constant tension (Thompson et al. 2020). Does larger indoor intensive farming lead to higher welfare standards and lower greenhouse gas emissions, as some proponents argue, or do smaller grass-fed farms produce better environmental, community, livelihood and welfare outcomes? Should we focus on improving animal welfare and livability, or should we cease to consume meat and dairy? Whilst a plethora of research has been undertaken on the various impacts of different dairy systems, it is increasingly recognised that a great deal is narrow in its emphasis, focusing on one aspect of the dairy conundrum over another.² Arguably, answers to such questions or “ethical disputes” ultimately cannot ever be fully resolved as they are grounded in values and predicated on moral and ethical judgements rather than “facts”, and are contextual and situated rather than universal (Tisenkopfs et al. 2019).³ Indeed, the very idea of “sustainability” itself is based on normative values which are both situated and highly contested (Coulson and Milbourne, 2020). Moreover, even labels such as

“organic” and “local”, just as “conventional” and “traditional”, are embedded in their own complex and contradictory understandings of morality (Goodman et al. 2010).

Through ethnographic research, this paper examines how values are constructed amongst a group of five small-to-medium dairy farmers in the United Kingdom (UK) who are trying to do things differently. Whilst the sample size is small, it is distinct: at the time of research, only one other UK “cow-calf contact rearing” dairy could be identified. It also follows Gibson-Graham’s (2014) epistemological imperative that rethinking the economy with “thick description” and “weak theory” visibilises how often-obscured social relations, such as care, sharing, reciprocity, stewardship, and social justice, come to bear on economic practices. Specifically, all but one of these farms sees themselves (and labels what they do) as explicitly “ethical” and all are employing a unique method of “cow-calf contact rearing” which focuses on keeping calves with their mothers for longer (from three months up to a year or more).⁴ The aim is to examine the values, principles, and motivating factors which underpin these activities, and how farmers navigate the tensions and trade-offs between key ethical goods and interests. As Clay and Yurco (2020, pp. 8–9) argue, ethnographic work and “place-based understanding of the diverse lives, livelihoods, and cultural ecologies of milk producers in the North” can help to “recast both producers and consumers as complex actors in food systems transformation” and “shed the imaginary of the dairy industry as a monolithic capitalist operation”.

The purpose of this paper is not to make judgements about the ethical justifications of different practices per se, but to examine the principles, values and motivations underlying the actions of those trying to move towards what they perceive as “better”. The focus is on exploring the normative dimensions of production, the value judgements and assumptions underpinning it, and the possibilities of moving towards better outcomes rather than on reductionist or utopian “solutions”. To do this, it draws on a feminist epistemology and methodology which sees “ethics” as situated and contextual, rather than universal, and places an emphasis on care, responsibility and relationships, and non-hegemonic framings of the economy. It therefore combines a feminist “ethics of care” lens, which emphasises the importance of contextual relations between all humans and nonhumans (Gilligan 2003; Fisher and Tronto 1990) with a “diverse economies” framing which focuses on reading for “difference rather than dominance” thereby allowing for possibilities of alternatives to hegemonic framings of capitalism to emerge (Gibson-Graham 2006a, b, 2008). This is important, because, as Gibson-Graham (2006a) argues,

² For example, a recent Food Climate Research Network (FCRN) report focused on the role of grazing animals in the net greenhouse balance, but not whether these systems are better for biodiversity or more humane (Garnett et al. 2017). Research on animal welfare and cow experience has also mostly focused exclusively on large-scale intensive dairies as opposed to small to medium ones (Holloway et al. 2014; Neo and Emel, 2017; Buller and Roe, 2018; Bear and Holloway, 2019; Clay et al. 2020). Similarly, broader sustainable agri-food systems research often focuses on environmental aspects to the exclusion of the social, political and economic (El Bilali et al. 2021).

³ Although, many moral philosophers would deny this as they would claim that at least some values, norms and morals are objective facts and are universal.

⁴ This which differs dramatically from conventional dairy where the norm within the first few days or even hours.

ethical decisions which centre affect and emotion (rather than structural imperatives and rationality) can be central to the development of new economic pathways.

The first section examines the recent explosion of discourse on “food ethics” in relation to food systems transformations to contextualise the current moment in which farmers are operating. It then makes the case for the usefulness of a feminist “ethics of care” approach, which focuses on relations rather than rights, and extends consideration of ethics to encompass care of all humans and nonhumans. Finally, it teases out the consequences of this for key debates on the need to expand the moral purview of ethics to take better account of nonhuman animals in general, and their potential role in the construction of ethical relationships—or “entanglements”—in farming specifically. These literatures come together to frame a feminist analysis of how those “entanglements” between humans and nonhumans have led farmers to reconfigure “relations” with cows and calves in ways they perceive to be “more ethical”. The second section introduces the five case-study farms and outlines the study’s methodological agenda. It shows how deploying an approach grounded in a feminist “ethics of care” can generate novel insights about alternative ways of dairying, and the importance of affective motivations, bovine agency and the principle of “care before profit” in developing new affective care economy pathways. The final section examines the “relations” and “entanglements” between humans and nonhuman animals empirically, interrogating the question of what, exactly, it means to dairy “ethically”. It draws out, on the basis of the foregoing theoretical agenda, three key themes: the role of affect in changing practices of care; the recognition of bovine agency and attempts to engage in dialogue with animals; and the prioritisation of principle—underpinned by a distinct care ethic—over profit. The paper concludes by reflecting on some of the broader claims opened up by the analysis—i.e. the importance of highlighting heterogeneity in dairy and the role of affect and bovine agency in creating new practices and dairy economies grounded in care—as well as its contribution to wider debates and implications for future research.

Food ethics, a feminist “ethics of care” and nonhuman entanglements

According to Thompson (2015), discussion of food ethics has become increasingly prevalent since the 1970s with the publication of books such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and Ruth Harrison’s *Animal Machines* (1964), to which we might add Peter Singers’ *Animal Liberation* (1975), which exposed the general public to the negative impacts of the modern industrial food system on the environment and animal welfare. Another flurry of documentaries

and books in the noughties brought additional focus on human health and farmer livelihoods, such as Marion Nestle’s *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002), Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me* (2004), and Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) (Thompson, 2015).⁵ More recently, increasing attention has been paid to the negative impacts of animal agriculture, and livestock and dairy in particular, with the publication of reports such as the FAO’s *Livestock’s Long Shadow* (2006), and anti-dairy and pro-vegan viral campaigns, such as *Dairy is Scary* (2015) and Go Vegan World’s *Humane Milk is a Myth* (2017). In an age of progressively industrialised agriculture, balancing the key ethical interests of farmer livelihoods, environmental sustainability, animal welfare and human health has become increasingly fraught with tension on both the local and global scale.

Ethics have also become integrated into market discourse and practice. In recent years, we have seen a rapid insertion of the term “ethical” into production, distribution and consumption lexicons (Goodman et al. 2010). Brunori et al (2019, p. 258) argue that food companies are “eager to adopt ethical values to legitimise themselves and thereby gain more power within the agri-food system”. This means they are increasingly involved in the “social construction of ethics... to steer the process of values creation towards their commercial advantage” and this raises “important questions regarding ethical foodscapes, associated values and social practices” (Brunori et al. 2019, p. 258). It also suggests that ethics has become “conventionalized” and subsumed into neoliberal agendas themselves (Goodman et al. 2010). Through individualisation, responsabilisation and the embedding of neoliberal subjectivities, consumers are increasingly encouraged to take on moral responsibility for their food choices (Shamir 2008) and to enact consumer citizenship (Food Ethics Council, n.d.). We might, therefore, ask how ethical “ethical” products really are? As Clay et al’s (2020) study of non-dairy “mylks” shows, people are urged to care about animal welfare, the environment and health, but ultimately remain consumers of a commodity food, thereby reinforcing the political economy of industrial agriculture and perpetuating a neoliberal individualised response to perceived injustices in the food system. It is therefore useful to make a distinction between “food ethics” as a “consumer practice”, on the one hand, and “philosophical food ethics” as a theoretical and deliberative inquiry into the moral norms and normative dimensions, on the other (Thompson 2015, p. 83; 2016, p. 61). No matter how philosophical it may be, though, as seen with the cases of plant-based mylks and

⁵ A plethora of other books were also influential at this time: Tim Lang’s *Food Wars* (2004); Waldon Bello’s *The Food Wars* (2009) and Raj Patel’s *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (2009) amongst others.

animal welfare standards, food ethics can still be packaged and sold just like any other market commodity. The distinction is nonetheless useful, because, as we shall see, farmers' own discourses sometimes slip between deliberating over their own values and morality and using the label "ethical" to ultimately distinguish the commodity value of the product which they are selling. Ultimately, the relationship between the two is messy, complex and uneven, and—at least in the case of "ethical dairying"—it cannot be wholly written off as the clear-cut subsumption of ethics by capitalism.

Philosophical ethics encompass a wide range of agendas, such as Singer's (1975) *utilitarian approach* to animal rights and liberation which focuses on the consequences of actions and the extent to which they promote happiness or prevent pain, or Cochrane's (2018) *rights-based approach* which focuses on the idea that animals, as sentient beings, are the bearers of rights and should therefore be incorporated into democratic processes. However, whilst such framings are useful, feminists have long critiqued universalizing theories developed through masculinist, Western-centric prisms as presupposing the possibility of applying rules and norms without paying attention to the particularities of context (Smith and Duffy 2003).⁶ Of particular influence in this regard has been the work of Gilligan (2003) on the "ethics of care" which emphasises the importance of social interaction and personal relationships in the development of feminine ideals which are often absent in discourses about ethics, as opposed to the importance of masculine ideals of separation, rationality and individuation. Gilligan argues that moral problems arise "from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights", therefore resolution requires "a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (Gilligan 2003, p. 17 quoted in Smith and Duffy 2003, p. 108). A focus on ethical thought as "storytelling" that is "grounded in the complex practicalities of every life" and teases out "differing forms of ethical relations between real people" is therefore key to this approach (Smith and Duffy 2003, p. 108). It also has implications for the way we consider "ethics" themselves. As Gilligan argues (2003, p. 73), "the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach". This focus on relations in general, and specifically relation of "care", is particularly useful for understanding the ways farmers navigate complex ethical relations between humans, nonhuman animals and the environment.

The "ethics of care" can, of course, be critiqued for being essentialist in its orientation of associating care with women.

⁶ This means they have also traditionally focused on the "public" rather than "private" sphere. Yet, as Eisen (2020) has shown much of what happens on farms in relation to the lives of dairy animals takes place in the "private" sphere.

As Nelson (2015) argues, essentialising care work as feminine has the potential to exclude men who participate in it. However, as demonstrated by her reclaiming of the word "husbandry" in the agrarian context, masculine forms of care work have long been an indisputable part of the economy (Nelson 2015). Nevertheless, an "ethics of care", more broadly defined, encompasses *both* women and men's care of themselves, other humans, nonhuman animals, the environment and future generations (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018; Harcourt 2014). For example, Fisher and Tronto (1990, p. 40) define care as:

species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (emphasis in original).

This definition is notably broad in its scope. It neither assumes women rather than men "have a special ability to sustain our world", nor is it restricted to human interaction or relations solely between two beings. It also recognises that definitions of care differ culturally and historically (Fisher and Tronto 1990, p. 40; Tronto 1993). For Tronto (1993, p. 3), a care ethic involves consideration of values traditionally associated with women and traditionally excluded from public consideration, such as "attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, meeting others' needs", rather than as an activity solely concerned with women. It is also important to note that relations do not only involve care, but "care is itself relational" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 198). It is this broad understanding of care and relations between humans and nonhumans that is taken forward in this paper.

In addition to a conception of ethics beyond a masculine perspective, it is increasingly argued that we need to expand the moral purview of ethics to take nonhuman animals into account (Cochrane 2012, 2018; Hovorka 2015; Tisenkopfs et al. 2019; Adams and Donovan 2007). How we do this, though, is contested within and between different strands of thought in academia, science, food production and amongst consumers.⁷ The most common way of approaching it in the food sector has been through attention to "animal welfare".

⁷ The most common definitions of animal welfare include consideration of three broad and overlapping aspects: basic health and functioning of animals in terms of body and environment (food, shelter, water, and freedom from disease and injury); affective state which recognises that animals have emotions and feelings (such as fear, frustration, pain and pleasure); and natural living and behaviour which focuses on animal's being able to live a natural life (Hewson 2003; Fraser 2008; Clay et al. 2020). According to Hewson (2003, p.497) the public is thought prefer the natural living approach, however, "as with the physical and mental aspects of welfare, scientists have largely discounted this as the sole basis for ensuring optimum animal welfare".

However, this can mean very different things. Critical Animal Studies (CAS), for example, argues that such welfare is confined to anthropocentric thought, which centres a human understanding of the world, with animals viewed as subordinate (Twine 2010). CAS therefore argues for complete abolition: i.e. the ending of confinement and use of animals for human purposes (White 2009; Best 2009). Care ethicists, such as Adams and Donovan (2007, p. 3), argue that attention to *both* “individual animal suffering” and the “political and economic systems” that cause it are central to theorising about animals, and this is the key difference between their approach and that of “animal welfare”. Donovan (2006) asks that we work in “dialogue” with animals, direct attention to what they are telling us (i.e. that they do not want to be killed) and take this into account in our ethical decisions. Others, such as Porcher (2020, p. 11), argue against abolitionists and contend instead that the “ancient work relationship” of “animal husbandry” should be regarded as different from “the livestock industry” which “grew out of industrial capitalism” and whose only motive is “the pursuit of profit”.

Other research in animal geographies focuses on the negative consequences of industrial farming for humans and nonhumans, whilst also emphasising a social justice perspective that tends to focus on improving the lives of animals and the eradication of factory farming rather than livestock farming altogether (Hovorka 2015; Emel and Neo 2015; Neo and Emel 2017). As Schlottmann and Sebo (2019, p. 175) argue, whilst the utopian goal might be complete eradication, we cannot ignore the fact that the majority of meat and dairy “comes from an industrial animal agricultural system that causes massive and unnecessary harm to humans, non-humans, and the environment”. Some therefore argue that improving the lives of animals might be a more plausible and achievable outcome than focusing on the complete abandonment of meat and dairy consumption altogether (Singer 2008; as referenced in Buller and Roe 2018, p. 34). Rather than focusing on human-centred narratives, a growing body of work in animal studies and geographies also looks at non-human animal subjectivity, agency and experience (Holloway 2002; Holloway et al. 2014; Wilkie 2005; Bear and Holloway 2019). In particular, it addresses how relations or “entanglements” between humans and nonhumans are co-constituted and co-produced (Haraway 2008; Collard, 2012; Probyn 2014; Barua 2016). Haraway’s (2008) concept of “encounter value”, for example, points to the importance of the “liveliness of animals” to the constitution of myriad types of relations. As Gorman (2018) found in the case of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives, alternative approaches to relations between humans and livestock can create spaces for alternative “animal encounters”.

Amid rising discourses on “food ethics”, this paper consequently centres a feminist approach to ethics based on an “ethics of care” and a focus on situated and contextual

relations—or *entanglements*—between humans and nonhuman animals. By examining marginal, rather than hegemonic spaces, it offers the opportunity to: understand the potential of new visions of alternative food systems; challenge dominant narratives; and consider the extent to which the values and qualities of “ethical” alternatives can be said to be commodified. It also helps to reveal, empirically, how an affective economy of care, where bovine agency and stewardship of the natural world in which cows function are taken seriously, sits alongside more conventional capitalist imperatives. Given the practical financial pressures facing farmers, it could perhaps never fully supplant them, but neither is it subordinate to them. In fact, as we will see, for ethical dairies, these care-centred entanglements are often the very point of their work and dominate their thinking about it, with profit-making an unavoidable, but relatively distant, consideration.

Methodological approach and introducing “ethical” dairies

Guided by a feminist epistemology, a focus on “cow-calf contact rearing” was chosen based on the principle of looking for “difference rather than dominance”, the alternative approach of prioritising the principle of “care” over profit, and the higher than usual prevalence of female farmers in this group. Five of the six farms identified in the UK as adopting these alternative farming methods at the time of research agreed to participate in this study. Although they have also been embraced by a small number of farms globally, due to time and funding restraints, this study focused on the UK specifically. Methodologically, an ethnographic and qualitative approach was deployed that sought to examine “ethics” as situated and contextual, rather than universal. Interviews were conducted with the main agricultural holder(s) at each farm in 2018.⁸ In some cases, this was with the sole lead farmer; in others, business partners or spouses participated. Informal conversations were also conducted with herdspersons, milkers and workers who were present on the day of interview. Each interview lasted between 80 to 180 min and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most of the visits included a tour of the farm where informal conversation continued. Additional ethnographic notes and observations were written down after each visit, further supplemented with data collected from websites, ethnographic notes from attending relevant livestock-related conferences, and additional interviews with a range of industry

⁸ Ethical approval was granted by The University of Sheffield.

representatives.⁹ The focus of interviews and visits was to explore how ethics, values, and human and nonhuman relations are constructed vis-à-vis the development of alternative dairying practices. Analysis of interview data involved two rounds of thematic coding: the first to identify broad themes and the second to refine those themes therein. Key themes that emerged were a focus on affect, bovine agency and care, which in turn connect to the feminist “ethics of care” underpinning the research.

The practice of keeping calves with their mothers for considerably longer than in conventional dairy farming has been variously described as “calf-at-foot”, “cow-calf dairying”, “calf-with-cow”, “mother-bonded calf suckling”, “mother-bonded calf rearing” and “cow-calf contact rearing”. No agreed definition currently exists in the literature. A recent review by Sirovnik et al (2020, p. 109), however, settles on the term “cow-calf contact rearing” which they define as “any system allowing physical contact between a dam and her own calf, or between a foster cow and her foster calf”.¹⁰ This is distinguished from conventional “artificial rearing” systems where calves are separated from the mothers in the days (sometimes hours) after calving and fed “milk-replacer from an artificial source” (Sirovnik et al. 2020, p. 109). Although each participating farm practiced the alternative system, there was a great deal of variation in how they did so. Each aligned itself with a much wider range of “ethical” values or “goods” beyond cow and calf experience: these diverged from the more conventional path of intensification, and included a focus on environmental sustainability, raw milk production, local production-consumption networks, on-farm processing, farm-gate sales, smaller herd sizes, closer relations with consumers, reusable milk bottles, and, in some cases, grassroots activism and education.

Farm 1 is a “slaughter-free” dairy. It is perhaps the most radical example of an “ethical” dairy in the UK. Animal welfare is paramount, and the death of one for human purposes is unacceptable. All cows in this system live out their years on the farm, and all calves stay with their mothers until they naturally wean. Its Directors are a male–female team;

⁹ Specific findings from interviews are not included in this paper, yet conversations with actors such as Dairy UK, the Food Ethics Council, the Free Range Dairy Network (CIC), Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), Nestle, Harper Adams University, the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF), Women in Dairy and four larger conventional dairy farmers along with observations made at events (such as UK Dairy Day 2017 and Compassion in World Farming’s 2017 Extinction and Livestock Conference) contributed to the authors understanding of the sector and field. The author also participated in the *Dairy Tales: Global Portraits of Milk and Law* symposium, University of Arizona, 8–9 Nov, 2019. See Special Issue (16) of the *Journal of Food Law and Policy* (2020).

¹⁰ The technical term “dam” is used in the industry to describe the “mother” of a calf. However, for readership intelligibility “mother” is used throughout this paper.

workers are mostly volunteers. Cows are a mix of breeds, milked by hand, and grazed on organic pasture. Bottles are 100 per cent recyclable and the farm declares its milk “the most ethical in the UK”. It sells its milk raw, at the farm gate, over the Internet, and at farmers’ markets. In 2018, it had 32 cows on around 50 acres, and sold its milk for £4.50 a litre. It does not use artificial insemination.

Farm 2 describes itself as a “calf-at-foot” dairy “producing proper-milk with compassion, making the world a better place for dairy cows: you can taste the kindness”.¹¹ Calves are kept with their mothers from anything from 5 to 12 months. The main agricultural holder is female, as are most of her workers. Cows are milked once a day using a small portable (on wheels) electric milking machine. Male calves go to slaughter at around 2 years old. Cows are Jersey and grass fed. The principles of ecological farming are followed (but organic certification has not been sought or desired). Milk is sold raw at the farm gate and online. In 2018, it had 11 cows on 40 tenanted acres, and sold its milk for £2.50 a litre.

Farm 3, which calls itself a “cow with calf dairy”, also specialises in “keeping calves with their mothers rather than weaning them from birth—usually for 6–8 months”. The head is female, as is the main milker. Cows are milked using a portable electric machine. Cows are fed on grain rather than grass. Butter is sold to a couple of commercial buyers and a Michelin starred restaurant. Milk, pasteurised on-site, is sold in an on-farm shop and online. The dairy is based on a conventional arable 400-acre farm. In 2018, it had 30 milking cows and sold its milk for £1.50 a litre.

Farm 4 also operates a “Calf-with-Cow policy”. This means that “calves stay with their mothers until they are old enough to be weaned—usually between 4 and 8 months”. The main agricultural holder is male, and in 2018 was supported by 9 part-time workers. The farm operates a holistic organic management system. Milk is pasteurised on-site and sold wholesale to coffee shops and online. Bulls go for beef at 14 months. In 2018, it had 80 Ayrshire cattle on just over 200 tenanted acres, and sold its milk for £1.80 per litre.

Farm 5 is a commercial farm in the UK practising “cow with calf” and describes itself as “a farming revolution”. The farm is run by a husband-wife team, with the husband in charge of production and wife in charge of processing. It is a certified organic farm. It sells its milk directly to a conventional processor and also processes its milk into cheese and ice cream which is sold both on and off-site. In 2018, it had around 100 crossbreed and Ayrshire cows, on just over 800 tenanted acres.

By looking at these uniquely “ethical” farms it was possible to examine the discourses of a group of farmers who

¹¹ The term “calf-at-foot” derives from the practice of selling cows with calves at foot at cattle markets.

consciously highlighted an “ethics of care” in their work. This “ethic” was examined by asking them about factors influencing their structural and ideological location (such as gender and the history of how they came to adopt the approach), and relations with their animals (including behavioural changes), workers, surrounding community, environment, economy and industry. Focusing on social interactions, personal relationships and experiences (as suggested by Gilligan, 2003) between humans and nonhumans helped to reveal ethical relations between farmers and bovines (and by extension the environment and economy). As the research process unfolded, it became clear that the human-bovine interactions shaped and were also evidently shaped by, the broader economic and environmental context. Consequently, “contextual relations” were further examined and situated through ethnographic note-taking and analysis of farm visits, conferences and a range of interviews with key actors in the sector (see footnote 9 for further detail).

Changing entanglements with calves, cows and care

This section examines the three broad areas that emerged in relation to the “ethics of care” mobilised by farmers in this study: the role of affective motivations in changing practices of care; the need to recognise the importance of bovine agency and engage in dialogue with animals; and the enactment of the principle of “care before profit”.

Affective motivations and changing practices of care

The proliferation of industrial farming systems has drastically altered relations between farmers and their animals, with the latter treated as “commodities in a production chain rather than as sentient beings” (Burton et al. 2012, p. 175). Since the 1950s, the pursuit of efficiency, productivity and intensification in dairy has led farms to move from pasture-based systems to confined indoor feeding operations with a higher reliance upon technology and use of commercial inputs, such as feeds and antibiotics (Clay et al. 2020). In the industrial model of farming, animals are increasingly kept indoors, and removed from “plain view” of the public (Buller and Roe 2018). This has resulted in larger farm sizes and the replacement of much human labour with mechanization and an increased distance—both physical and emotional—between farmers and their livestock. A “conventional” dairy farm would therefore be considered a more intensive one which is high-input and high-output, has a larger herd size, and operates a largely confined housing system. The farms in this study are, however, attempting to move in precisely the opposite direction by deliberately centring human-cow/calf relations, cow experiences, and the quality of animals’

lives. As one farmer commented: “We would be vehemently opposed to those [mega-dairies]—intensive dairies where cows are housed inside all year round—because I don’t think it’s nice for the cows or the humans doing it either” [Farm 1 F].

The desire to move towards a system where “calves stay with their mums” was found to stem from overlapping but distinctive rationales across the dairies linked to place, history, gender, ideology and affective relations with animals themselves. An ethic of “care”, and a language of responsibility, nurturance, and compassion towards nonhuman animals and the environment pervaded farmer discourses. The proponents of the two smallest farms (one female-led, and one led jointly by a female-male team) both started from an ethical stance which placed a premium on their relationship with animals and nature, and the ability of the animals to live the most natural life possible (bound by their own constructions of what this means). These farmers had backgrounds working on animal rights, the environment and campaigns on cow welfare, anti-cruelty (especially calves), the veal trade, live animal export, and on a Goshala [Farm 1 F, Farm 1 M, Farm 2].¹² In both cases, opposition to conventional dairy systems played a strong role. As one commented, “We were appalled by a lot of the practices happening in the intensive dairy system. Basically, people came to us and asked: ‘Where can we get cruelty-free milk from?’” [Farm 1 F]. Both kept their calves with their mothers for longest. Farm 2 aimed for about nine months to a year.¹³ Farm 1 left calves to their own devices which means they could still be suckling for up to a year.

For another female farmer, who led a small dairy from within a larger conventional farm she ran with her husband, part of the motivation was being “a big softie” [Farm 3]. Having a cow with a calf satisfies her “from a purely personal, selfish point of view”, both in terms of the mothering connection and bonding—“they clean them up, they feed them the colostrum and they bond”—and her own relationship with the cows: “I couldn’t physically take one away, I couldn’t do it” [Farm 3]. Again, an instinctive opposition to conventional approaches was evident: “it’s not how you do things. You have a calf. You take it away. You have the milk. And we thought, well, there’s a few problems with that” [Farm 3]. On this farm, weaning times varied depending on whether the cow was a Jersey cross (six months) or a pure Jersey (eight or nine months) because the latter are a lot smaller, and they don’t drink as much milk which means “they’re not guzzling everything” and “it’s a more natural

¹² A Goshala is a Hindu farm and cow sanctuary which is built on the principles of cow care, protection and non-slaughter). Interview codes for Farm 1 include both a female and male respondent which are referred to as [Farm 1 F] and [Farm 1 M] accordingly.

¹³ Although it can be 6 months if the heifers get too fat too quickly.

weaning age” [Farm 3]. It can also depend on the cow as each will take to it differently.

The starting position of the two larger dairies (one male-headed, and one a husband-wife team), was different again, with both having primarily undertaken or being in the process of transitioning from a conventional dairy farm to an ecological or organic one. This was influenced by several factors. For Farm 5, it was a “gradual process” of “becoming uncomfortable with the way I was farming and questioning it”. This began over 20 years ago with the move to organic farming. Once they were finding it reasonably profitable, they started thinking “‘This is working quite well. What about the cows?’” [Farm 5]. Furthermore, he was also influenced by his wife’s questioning of conventional methods: “She was aghast at some of the things we were doing that we thought was good farming practice” [Farm 5]. For Farm 4, the transition was more recent. In 2013, to increase production and try to make a better margin, his father started keeping cows indoors, feeding a higher concentrate ration and moved to three and then four times per day milking. But after his father passed away, and the milk price collapsed, he thought “there must be a different way”. He started by cutting milkings to twice a day. A year later it collapsed again to 9p a litre causing a £100,000 loss in his first year. He decided that things had to change drastically and started looking into self-processing, becoming organic, selling directly to consumers, and the “calf-with-cow” system.

Structural and economic constraints were clearly motivations to some extent, but feelings, affect and an ethics of care also play a strong role:

I just felt that the cow health wasn’t great... it didn’t feel right to have the cows indoors all the time... I thought, ‘If we need to put fans in a shed, why are they in a shed?’... I mean don’t get me wrong, I’ve visited lots of farms that keep their cows indoors. You walk in, the cows are relaxed, they are happy, they’re producing lots of milk but it’s the argument between welfare and ethics [Farm 4].

The time for which the calves stay with their mums was the shortest at these two farms, although still dramatically different when compared with conventional dairy, with Farm 5 aiming for around five months and calves at Farm 4 fully weaned at three months.¹⁴

Although it is impossible to completely disentangle gender from size, as the smaller farms in this study tended to have a higher proportion of female farmers and workers, and arguably smallness leads to farmers working more closely with animals, there was a clear distinction between

responses of female and male farmers in the study. Although all indicated a desire to improve the well-being and experiences of cows and calves in their care, and this played a key role in their decision to try cow-calf dairying, female farmers placed an even stronger emphasis on concerns about animal suffering and welfare, and the importance of human-bovine and cow-calf relations. This could conceivably be due to the different structural location of women and men in farming, both in relation to access to land and resources (social, economic and political), and with women and men socialised into doing farming differently, and talking about cows and calves differently. As Burton et al (2012) suggest, “cowshed culture” can be self-reinforcing with humans and nonhuman actors all contributing to specific ways of being and doing on farms. For example, the two larger, more “commercial” farms in the study were headed by males.

That said, both female and male farmers encountered a range of barriers in their transition to “cow-calf contact rearing” and to more ecological methods. As is often found with transitions from high-capital and high-energy systems to labour-intensive and low energy ones, these barriers were mostly social, cultural and political, rather than technical (Altieri 2018, p. 369). Resistance came from friends and neighbours, as well as other farmers and industry representatives. As one commented: “There’s so much rhetoric from the industry, from tradition... If you’re the one that’s trying to do something different, you’re the idiot” [Farm 4]. Furthermore:

When I phoned up AHDB [the Agriculture and Horticultural Development Board]... saying I was looking into calf at foot dairying, the first thing I was told was, ‘Be very careful. No one here thinks it’s a good idea’. Now they want to interview me about calf at foot dairying, so it just shows you how it can change.¹⁵

As a young female, another farmer found she was often told: “‘That’s ridiculous, you can’t just feed cows on grass’ and ‘You won’t sell it, it’s raw’” [Farm 2]. The overriding experience is that despite best efforts to engage, there is a lack of interest from academics and industry in the successes of the more “ethical” and “caring” models that these farmers are attempting to demonstrate [Farm 2, Farm 4, Farm 5].

Recognising bovine agency and engaging in dialogue with animals

It is evident that, whilst the narratives of each farmer are different, all were propelled to varying degrees by witnessing the feelings and experiences of their animals, and distress between calf and mother. As Holloway (2002) suggests,

¹⁴ From a science animal welfare perspective, there is currently a lack of research on the time period which would produce the most benefit (Sirovnik et al. 2000).

¹⁵ The AHDB is the UK levy board which represents farmers, growers and others in the supply chain. This quote has been anonymised.

encounters between humans and nonhumans are important to the construction of situated ethical identities. These interactions therefore create space for affective empathy which in this case has led to improved care. Importantly, such “entanglements” are not unidirectional, but rather cows themselves play a role in the creation of new ethical relationships in farming. One farmer described how she fell in love with cows whilst living next door to a dairy farm as a child, and how it was not until she was older and started working on farms that she began to associate calves “dying to suck your fingers with them needing their mother” [Farm 2]. The tactile experience of working with cows and calves therefore clearly influenced the development of her own moral outlook. Another farmer describes the first time he considered keeping the calves with their mums:

I was bringing a newborn calf and a mother in... they'd been [out in the field] for about six hours. They'd obviously bonded because they'd seen each other... the cow was really upset because I was taking the calf away. I put the calf in the pen, the mother was distraught for two days. It's horrendous that, the stress on these animals is terrible... Then I thought 'is there a better way?' [Farm 4].

Here, the witnessing of distress between cow and calf prompted this farmer to question accepted farming practices and propelled him to look for change.

For some, particularly female farmers, the desire to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships with their cows and calves was also key. Amongst those interviewed, there was a stronger emphasis on mothering and care, both between cow and calf, and between human and cow-calf from female farmers. As one commented:

It's the relationship, the mother calf bond. I'm always at great pains to point out that it's not just the cow and calf, it's the whole herd. The rest of our cows always pile in to do aunty duties, often the mothers are a bit like aristocratic ladies of years gone by. They see the calves twice a day, but they let the others do the daily looking after. It's the whole herd, really, that are bringing up the calves [Farm 1 F].

For her, calves brought up in that relationship are more confident and healthier. Furthermore, her interest is not just in caring for cows and calves herself, but enabling the whole herd to care for their own calves. Another female farmer similarly suggests that it is not just about having calves with mums, but also them being able to run with, be nursed and nuzzled by, play in the field and biff their mum [Farm 2].¹⁶

Being able to view cows as individuals was also crucial for some: “Fundamentally for us, all cows are sentient

beings. They're all individuals. Having a relationship with each and every one of them, on that cow's merits, is really important to us” [Farm 1 F]. For this farmer, it is wonderful bond between animals and humans, which conventional farming has lost [Farm 1 F]. Tapping into understandings of care as relational (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 2017) she sees it as a type of contract, which has been broken of late: “We look after them” and “in return, they give to us” [Farm 1 F]. An emphasis on the reciprocal bond and symbiotic relationship between humans and cows is key here.

The idea of treating cows as individuals is also a recurring theme. For one farmer, it was a realisation that developed in the transition from the conventional system where cows are housed 365 days a year to what they are doing now:

they're not machines anymore. They're part of what we're doing and they're all their own individual animals. They've got their own attitudes... whereas when it was house 365, they were robots, they got up, they ate [Farm 4].

As another comments:

The cows... have their own psychological issues... It's easy for a farmer just to say, 'Cut off that bit'. But they are sentient. There is no question. They are very aware of what is going on. They have been born into captivity... They are carers... Undoubtedly, they are more vociferous now that we have given them more rights... But... they are very good-natured. The whole herd is so much calmer [Farm 5].

The idea of cows as carers themselves resurfaces here and the framing of increased “rights” suggests that cows have more autonomy in this system. The increased agency of cows is also emphasised by another farmer:

When they feed their calves, they give us less. But they can hold whatever they want to keep for their calves... in their udders. So, if we milk them before their calves are fed, they'll say: 'Alright, that's enough now'. And they will literally just stop supplying [Farm 3].

Relations between humans and nonhuman animals in this context can therefore be seen to be co-constituted and relational, and undergirded by a strong “ethic of care”. The farmers evidently desire to give their animals what they see as being a more “natural” and fulfilling life, mimicking how they would be “back in nature”, and leading to calves and cows that are more relaxed, calm and confident.¹⁷ Working closely with animals themselves also increases affective empathy which influences farmers to re-negotiate ethical relations with them. Yet, as one farmer concedes, it is still

¹⁶ “Biff” refers to the action of a calf roughly striking its mother.

¹⁷ Although, we should note that farm animals are human creations and therefore there is not real “back in nature”.

“always going to be a compromise: the cows aren’t happy that we take the calves away from them eventually” [Farm 5].

In the same way that cows and calves act on farmers, they also act on the general public. It is generally thought that increasing public concern about separating dairy cows and calves has played a strong role in the development of alternative systems (Sirovnik et al. 2020; Wagenaar and Langhout 2007). As Buller and Roe (2018, p. 2) suggest, “concern for the welfare of farm animals... constitutes a significant and vital linkage between the processes and the acts of production and consumption”. At each farm, the distance between producer and consumer was shortened by selling milk, and other dairy produce, directly to customers through a combination of online and on-farm shops, home and business deliveries, local and national stocklists, and with some also offering farm tours. As one farmer commented, “direct selling to customers really makes you aware of what the customers are looking for... what they believe in” [Farm 4]. The increasing disconnection between the urban and rural was seen to be a key issue amongst farmers (especially in relation to veganism). As one commented, at the same time as economic pressures started to deepen, “the vegan movement was starting to get going” and this also played a role in his decision to try “cow-calf contact rearing”.

Maintaining an affective economy of “principle before profit”

In a capitalist world, no farmer can escape price pressures entirely (especially not in dairy where they are perhaps even more acute than elsewhere in farming). Due to a range of structural, social, economic and political factors, such as a decline in subsidies, deregulation and global competition, dairy farmers globally are under a great deal of increasing price pressure with regards to their milk (Clay et al. 2020; Thompson 2020). This often leads to a situation where farmers either need to scale up and intensify production or switch to more niche higher-value products (Clay et al. 2020). However, many of the participants in this study are attempting to prioritise an explicit “ethic of care” in relation to their animals over profit. For each, in different ways, the latter is consciously subordinated to the former. Furthermore, the “ethic of care” enacted by many of them extends well beyond relations with their cows and calves to include entanglements with the social and ecological systems in which those relations exist. This mirrors a feminist understanding of care which encompasses all relations between the self, humans, nonhumans and even future generations (Harcourt 2014; Fisher and Tronto 1990).

All farmers reflected on the increasing challenges, pressures and constraints that the industry faces today. The dairy sector was seen to be a difficult environment within which to

try to do something better. A key part of the problem is that they not paid enough for their milk. As one explained, it is a “sad situation” as farmers are “pushed into a corner whether they have inherited their farm or decided to take it on” and are only getting paid 20 or 25 pence a litre, or sometimes as little as 13p [Farm 1 M]. This leads to a situation where the “the big boys” are forced to grow their herds bigger, animal welfare goes down, other things are sacrificed, and debt increases. This means that:

the more traditional [conventional] way of doing dairy is basically forced upon people. They have no choice... They borrowed money to buy the cows and the equipment and everything else, and they’re tied to a contract... so there’s no freedom [Farm 3].

As another farmer explains, the supermarkets and processors “are controlling the food market... They pay the minimum that they think they can get away with to sustain the supply. The farmer is in the middle” [Farm 5]. As the price of milk has declined, farms are often faced with the choice to get bigger or get out.

Despite the structural constraints they face, the farmers in this study are driven by what they see as more “ethical” and “sustainable” values, and are envisaging and developing ways of doing things differently. As one explains:

Our ethic, in the background of all this, is principle before profit. We know how to make profit, and we have to make it work, but we won’t sacrifice the principles for the sake of profitable outcomes... We’re as far away from intensive as it’s possible to be [Farm 1].

However, she feels that the whole farming system has been geared towards the big players in the last few decades, which means that small- and medium-sized farms are not being given the government support they need [Farm 1 F]. Furthermore:

When people [big farmers/the farming community] see us, they think, ‘Who are these guys?’ They roll their eyes a little. What they’re shocked at is that we can fetch £4.50 a litre in the marketplace. Perhaps that makes them think [Farm 1 M].

All the farms—apart from Farm 5, which sold its organic milk to a commercial processor—produce their milk for a premium, which in 2018 ranged from £1.50 to £4.50 (at the non-slaughter farm). These prices notionally correlated with the length of time calves remained with their mothers. Improved farming methods clearly require that consumers pay a higher price for food. Therefore, it could be argued that these farmers have responded to market pressures by switching to a higher value niche product which accrues value from increased “care”. However, this would obscure

the values underpinning the approach of these farmers. As the slaughter-free farm explained:

We do charge a lot for our milk, but that money is going into our cows’ pension fund. When we say we’re slaughter free, we’re slaughter free and that is for life... a cow can live until she’s 20 – or an ox for that matter. There’s an expense and cost in that [Farm 1].

A higher price was also commanded by those farms selling their milk “raw” which can be sold for a premium of around £1.50 per litre.

We can see ethical tensions between consumer preferences, animal health and farmer livelihoods quite clearly in the following comment by the most commercial dairy:

The health of the calves is better on the mothers, with the calf getting their immunity straight from the colostrum... We’ve got calves out there that are two and a half months old that are bigger than six-month old calves reared the old way. I’m now trying to desperately find a financial benefit because although they look great, it’s great and the ethics are brilliant and everybody loves it, it’s very, very costly [Farm 5].

This highlights a conflict between improving the lives of animals and the need to be economically viable to survive as a farm. At the same time, in trying to improve the lives of cows and calves, these farmers are pushing in the opposite direction of moves towards further intensification. Drawing on Buller and Roe’s (2018) tripartite model of engagement with animal welfare, we can see how they are choosing an “ethical” approach which centres an ethical commitment to ensuring animals have a life worth living and a deontological ethic of care (concerning what is thought to be right or wrong), rather than an “empirical” understanding which focuses on the scientific measurement of feelings and suffering, with varying levels of “economic” embeddedness in terms of the extent to which welfare has become commodifiable.

It is clear that ethical tensions between animal welfare and farmer livelihoods are deliberated at the minute level amongst dairy farmers themselves. As one illustrates, it is not just about the money: “I don’t really want to stock anyone else’s milk, because I have a bit of a welfare issue. I would probably make more money on it, but I’d rather not” [Farm 3]. Another notes how “We are not perfect. We are far from perfect. But we have got cows that are well into their teens” whereas “cows, in the industrial system, are producing huge amounts of milk, but they burn out after two and a half years” [Farm 5]. This ethos also extends to the ecological environment in which human-cow relations are situated. As Farm 5 has found: you do not “need to be profitable first and then plant a few trees. You could do that and be profitable”. For them, producing good quality, affordable and

accessible food profitably without doing what conventional systems do was a key driver. Farmer 5 argued that by taking 4 tonnes of feed to produce 1 tonne of human equivalent food, intensive dairies are “sucking huge amounts of food out of the food system” and depleting rather than “producing food”.

Relations of “care” extended beyond a focus on nonhuman animals to encompass “holistic” relations with the environment, human health and the broader food system in the other farms too. For four of the farms, ecological and organic techniques were central to their approach with farmer discourses inextricably linked to broader ethical concerns for the environment and the land. As one explained, “The whole thing is a bit of a circle. You start off with a healthy environment, so healthy soil and grass—then you get healthy cows... they produce beautiful healthy milk which sustains and makes healthy humans” [Farm 1 F]. There was also an emphasis on self-sufficiency. As another, who practices a holistic managed grazing system, commented:

[We] try and gain the highest amount of net food possible from the farm. Instead of buying four kilos of concentrate to produce one kilo of milk solids, the cows are eating grass, we’re not buying anything from anywhere else and the net food gain is much higher... and we’re not taking food away which could go into the human food chain. It’s all about the more holistic view [Farm 4].

For another farmer, ecological farming is about “using environmental, natural processes, and harnessing all that power that has been established over millennia to help us get what we want” and to help the “environment to get some of what it wants” [Farm 5]. However, it is not just about this:

We call [our farm ‘ethical’] not only because of the cow and calf thing, but because of all of the other stuff that we are doing as well... the environment stuff, the social stuff, as well as the animal welfare... We’re trying to create a food system here that is, well, always going to be a compromise, but is giving back to all sides [Farm 5].

For him, the problem is the powerful, well-funded and well-coordinated corporate interests that do *not* “care” about the food system and see ecological farming as a market threat because it does not support an economic model based around buying and selling goods. For example, in the conventional system, it is not uncommon for farms to spend £100,000 a year on chemicals, fertilisers, drugs and drenches. However, for one farmer, “Until someone proves that it [cow-calf contact rearing] can be done commercially, like [Farm 5]... no one is going to do it. It’s all very well for us on a small scale to say, ‘You’ve got to do it like this’” [Farm 3]. However, as noted above even Farm 5 who is working on a commercial

level felt there has been a distinct lack of interest in what they are doing.

Conclusion

Applying a feminist perspective—which reads for difference and theorises “ethics” as situated and contextual—to the examination of ethical tensions in UK dairy has shone a light on a small group of farmers who, motivated by affective relations and entanglements with cows, calves, and their broader environment, along with the agency of bovines themselves, are trying to do things differently. The approach taken by “ethical” dairies shows a keenness to renegotiate not only human-nonhuman animal relations but also social, economic and ecological ones too. The focus of these operations is still milk production, but the language of “profit maximisation”, “productivity” and “intensification” takes a back seat. In “cow-calf contact rearing”, there is a significant shift towards centring the quality of individual cow and calf lives, and improving relations between humans, nonhuman animals and the environment. It is also apparent that cows and calves themselves play a key role in this shift, as their encounters with humans influence changing practices of care. Unlike in technical and economic discourses, an “ethics of care” features prominently in the narratives of these farmers. Nonetheless, other than perhaps the “non-slaughter” model, the “cow-calf contact rearing” approach is inevitably still unable to overcome the ethical tension of the exploitation of life, death and the reproductive capacity of female cows. Most feminist care ethicists would, therefore, still likely favour full abolition. As Cochrane (2016) has argued, if any milk production method can meet ethical standards it would be the “non-slaughter” model.¹⁸ Yet, in terms of practising a range of improved relations between humans, nonhuman animals and the environment, these farms clearly provide a meaningful alternative model of how dairy might be done and also offer a counter-narrative to discourses which focus on a monolithic industrialised livestock industry.

The value of applying a feminist lens is that it has drawn attention to different kinds of dairy economies grounded in “care” that would fit neither the dominant abolitionist nor intensification narratives. As Clay and Yurco (2020) argue, highlighting heterogeneity in dairy complicates our understanding of food systems transformations in both the Global North and South. Arguably, focusing on dairy as either just “good” or “bad” obscures a range of alternative practices. At the same time, as Arcari (2016, 2017) suggests, just as technical discourses (animals as units and resources) and

the increased *invisibility* of animals in intensive farming can normalise animal production, the *visibilising* of animals in “ethical” production potentially works to “resettle” acceptance of animal production by casting it as an “improved” practice. Yet it is hard to ignore that, as a recent report in *The Guardian* reveals, the UK now has over 1000 mega-farms—many of them dairies—and these continue to grow at the expense of smaller farms (Colley and Wasley, 2022). This is not, of course, to say that ethical dairying offers a wholesale alternative to conventional production—this is evidently implausible for a range of reasons, and is a question out of the scope of this paper—but ethical dairying does represent a distinct and under-acknowledged ethically-driven approach which is potentially elided by the dominance of the two narrative extremes.

Arguably, the motivations of many of the farmers can be linked to feminine ideals of caring for the self and others (both human and nonhuman), mothering, reciprocity and nurturance. Whether intentionally or not, farmers also paid attention to what animals were telling them and took this into account in their ethical decisions. This meant that animals themselves participated in a form of dialogue about changing farm practices. This “ethic of care” developed variously through tactile experiences of working with bovines (such as touching, stroking, having fingers sucked), witnessing distress between calves and mothers, observing mother/herd bonds with calves and bovine behaviour, and from working with animal welfare and environmental groups and campaigns. Ultimately, a feminist lens has demonstrated ways of deconstructing monolithic narratives about dairy and showed evidence of alternative practices in terms of relations of care with nonhuman animals and the environment.

Thinking about future research, we might reflect on the extent to which the “ethics” of ‘ethical dairying’ and new feminine qualities of “care” and “living a natural life” have become commodifiable. What these farmers are doing is not clear-cut. There is undoubtedly a “value-added” element to centring animal welfare and experience to products which in some parts of the world is becoming part of a “new ethical repertoire of consumer-driven food concerns” (Buller and Roe 2018, p. 14). However, farmers interviewed do not appear to be cynically adopting discourses of “ethics” and “care” to legitimise their activities: they genuinely believe that what they are doing is better for humans and nonhumans alike. As we have seen, motivations combine a multitude of constructions of affect, care, welfare, and ideological and philosophical principles. The female farmers and non-slaughter dairy, in particular, are primarily motivated by a strong “ethic of care”, a desire to develop closer relations with their cows and calves, and to improve the quality of lives of the animals in their care. A sense of responsibility and reciprocity

¹⁸ Of course, this model is not without its limitations related to growing herd size and the significantly increased cost of milk.

for nonhuman animals, the environment, land and local economy pervaded all of the interviews. At the same time, using the label “ethical” to distinguish what they are doing clearly does have economic value. The male farmers in the study, whilst also placing a strong emphasis on an “ethics of care”, also more explicitly linked the adoption of “cow-calf contact rearing” with livelihood viability and continued survival. Yet, at the same time, all suggested that it was indeed financially challenging to run a “cow-calf” dairy.

Each of the farmers consulted could be described as a niche producer, and undoubtedly the packaging of a better cow experience enables a higher price to be sought for milk. Nonetheless, by the same token, particularly for those opting out of the commercial milk market and selling directly to customers, they are creating and demonstrating real possibilities of new alternative economies. But, for those with a stronger economic imperative, does this mean we can write them off as solely concerned with the “value-added” nature of the system? Analysis of these alternative systems would suggest that this would be an overly simplistic interpretation of what is going on. Despite the overwhelming ideological motivations of these farmers, it is unavoidable that their approach to animal welfare and keeping calves with their mums becomes central to the saleability of their milk and other products. As Buller and Roe (2018, p. 2) argue, food products have long drawn “specific attention to the broad environment and conditions of that life (‘free range’, ‘grass-fed’)”. However, few “refer specifically to the quality of individual animal lives” (Buller and Roe 2018, p. 20). In this respect, cow-with-calf dairying represents a significant shift towards centring the quality and fullness of animals’ lives to the way information is communicated about milk. However, for the small or alternative dairy farmer this move is not solely or even at all motivated by the desire to *sell* the ethical merits of their approach. Rather it is one motivated by strong feelings of care and attentiveness to working more closely and developing better relations with nonhuman animals, the environment and the local economy.

Acknowledgements The research informing this article was supported by the HEFCE/University of Sheffield match-funded N8 Agrifood programme. Many thanks to colleagues at the University of Birmingham (Brock Bersaglio, Niheer Dasandi and Fiona Nunan) and the University of Sheffield (Matt Bishop, Alasdair Cochrane and Justa Hopma), and to two anonymous reviewers, for their valuable comments on various versions of this paper. Many thanks also to my research participants without whom this research could not have happened.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no known conflicts of interest.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long

as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Adams, C., and J. Donovan. 2007. *The feminist care tradition in animal ethics: A reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Altieri, M.A. 2018. *Agroecology: The science of sustainable agriculture*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Arcari, P. 2016. Perverse visibilities? Foregrounding non-human animals in ‘ethical’ and ‘sustainable’ meat consumption. *The Brock Review* 13 (1): 24–53.
- Arcari, P. 2017. Normalised, human-centric discourses of meat and animals in climate change, sustainability and food security literature. *Agriculture and Human Values* 34 (1): 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-016-9697-0>.
- Barua, M. 2016. Lively commodities and encounter value. *Environment and Planning d: Society and Space* 34 (4): 725–744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775815626420>.
- Bauhardt, C., and W. Harcourt, eds. 2018. *Feminist political ecology and the economics of care*. London: Routledge.
- Bear, C., and L. Holloway. 2019. Beyond resistance: Geographies of divergent more-than-human conduct in robotic milking. *Geoforum* 104 (May): 212–221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.04.030>.
- Best, S. 2009. The rise of critical animal studies: Putting theory into action and animal liberation into higher education. *Journal of Critical Animal Studies* VII (1): 9–54.
- Brunori, G., D. Maye, F. Galli, and D. Barling. 2019. Symposium introduction—Ethics and sustainable agri-food governance: Appraisal and new directions. *Agriculture and Human Values* 36 (2): 257–261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-019-09929-y>.
- Buller, H., and E. Roe. 2018. *Food and animal welfare*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Burton, R.J.F., S. Peoples, and M.H. Cooper. 2012. Building ‘Cowshed Cultures’: A cultural perspective on the promotion of stockmanship and animal welfare on dairy farms. *Journal of Rural Studies* 28 (2): 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.12.003>.
- Clay, N., T. Garnett, and J. Lorimer. 2020. Dairy intensification: drivers, impacts and alternatives. *Ambio* 49 (1): 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01177-y>.
- Clay, N., and K. Yurco. 2020. Political ecology of milk: Contested futures of a lively food. *Geography Compass*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12497>.
- Cochrane, A. 2012. *Animal rights without liberation: Applied ethics and human obligations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cochrane, A. 2016. Labour rights for animals. In *The political turn in animal ethics*, ed. R. Garner and S. O’Sullivan, 15–32. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cochrane, A. 2018. *Sentientist politics: A theory of global inter-species justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198789802.001.0001>.
- Collard, R. 2012. Cougar—Human entanglements and the biopolitical un/making of safe space. *Environment and Planning d: Society and Space* 30 (1): 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d191110>.
- Colley, C., and Wasley, A. 2022. UK has more than 1,000 livestock mega-farms, investigation reveals. *The Guardian*, 18 Aug. <https://>

- www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/18/uk-has-more-than-1000-livestock-mega-farms-investigation-reveals
- Coulson, H., and P. Milbourne. 2020. Food justice for all?: Searching for the 'Justice Multiple' in UK food movements. *Agriculture and Human Values* 38: 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10142-5>.
- Donovan, J. 2006. Feminism and the treatment of animals: From care to dialogue. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31 (2): 305–329.
- Eisen, J. 2020. Private farms, public power: Governing the lives of dairy cattle volume sixteen. *Journal of Food Law & Policy* 16 (2).
- El Bilali, H., C. Strassner, and T.B. Hassen. 2021. Sustainable agri-food systems: Environment, economy, society, and policy. *Sustainability* 13 (11): 6260. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116260>.
- Emel, J., and H. Neo, eds. 2015. *Political ecologies of meat*. Oxon: Routledge.
- FAO. 2006. Livestock's long shadow—Environmental issues and options. *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10666-008-9149-3>.
- FAO. 2019. *Climate change and the global dairy cattle sector*. Rome: FAO.
- Fisher, B., and J.C. Tronto. 1990. Towards a feminist theory of care. In *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives*, ed. E.K. Abel and M.K. Nelson, 35–62. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Food Ethics Council. N.d. *Food citizenship*. London: Food Ethics Council.
- Fraser, D. 2008. Animal welfare and the intensification of animal production. *International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics* 16: 167–189. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8722-6_12.
- Garnett, T., C. Godde, A. Muller, E. Rööös, P. Smith, I. De Boer and E. Zu Ermgassen. 2017. Grazed and confused? Ruminating on cattle, grazing systems, methane, nitrous oxide, the soil carbon sequestration question-and what it all means for greenhouse gas emissions. *Food Climate Research Network*, 1–127. https://www.fcrn.org.uk/sites/default/files/project-files/fcrn_gnc_report.pdf.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006a. *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006b. *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2008. Diverse economies: performative practices for 'Other Worlds'. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (5): 613–632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821>.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2014. Rethinking the economy with thick description and weak theory. *Current Anthropology* 55 (S9): S147–S153. <https://doi.org/10.1086/676646>.
- Gilligan, C. 2003. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, M.K., D. Maye, and L. Holloway. 2010. Ethical foodscapes?: Premises, promises, and possibilities. *Environment and Planning A* 42 (8): 1782–1796. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a43290>.
- Gorman, R. 2018. Human-livestock relationships and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the UK. *Journal of Rural Studies* 61 (April): 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.04.013>.
- Haraway, D. 2008. *When species meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Harcourt, W. 2014. The future of capitalism: A consideration of alternatives. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 38 (6): 1307–1328. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bet048>.
- Hewson, C.J. 2003. What is animal welfare? Common definitions and their practical consequences. *Canadian Veterinary Journal* 44 (6): 496–499.
- Holloway, L. 2002. Smallholding, hobby-farming, and commercial farming: Ethical identities and the production of farming spaces. *Environment and Planning A* 34 (11): 2055–2070. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a34261>.
- Holloway, L., C. Bear, and K. Wilkinson. 2014. Robotic milking technologies and renegotiating situated ethical relationships on UK dairy farms. *Agriculture and Human Values* 31 (2): 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-013-9473-3>.
- Horton, P. 2017. We need radical change in how we produce and consume food. *Food Security*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-017-0740-9>.
- Hovorka, A. 2015. Foreward. In *Political ecologies of meat*, ed. J. Emel and H. Neo, xix–xxii. Oxon: Routledge.
- iPES. 2018. 'Towards a Common Food Policy for the EU' framing paper for the EU food and farming forum 2018. Brussels: iPES. <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity/data-and->.
- Kirwan, J., D. Maye, and G. Brunori. 2017. Reflexive governance, incorporating ethics and changing understandings of food chain performance. *Sociologia Ruralis* 57 (3): 357–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12169>.
- Nelson, J.A. 2015. Husbandry: A (feminist) reclamation of masculine responsibility for care. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bev060>.
- Neo, H., and J. Emel. 2017. *Geographies of meat: Politics, economy and culture*. *Geographies of meat*. Oxon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584386>.
- Porcher, J. 2020. *Animal labor: A new perspective on human-animal relations*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Probyn, E. 2014. Women following fish in a more-than-human world. *Gender, Place and Culture* 21 (5): 589–603.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2012. 'Nothing Comes without Its World': Thinking with care. *Sociological Review* 60 (2): 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2017. *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sandler, R.L. 2015. *Food ethics: The basics*. London: Routledge.
- Schlottmann, C., and J. Sebo. 2019. *Food, animals, and the environment: An ethical approach*. London: Routledge.
- Shamir, R. 2008. The age of responsibility: On market-embedded morality. *Economy and Society* 37 (1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140701760833>.
- Singer, P. 1975. *Animal liberation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Singer, P. 2008. Foreward. In *The future of animal farms: Renewing the ancient contract*, ed. A. Dworkins and R. Bonney. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sirovnik, J., K. Barth, D. De Oliveira, S. Ferneborg, M.J. Haskell, E. Hillmann, M. Bak Jensen, et al. 2020. Methodological terminology and definitions for research and discussion of cow-calf contact systems. *Journal of Dairy Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022029920000564>.
- Smith, M., and R. Duffy. 2003. *The ethics of tourism development*. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, P. 2015. *From field to fork: Food ethics for everyone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, P. 2016. The emergence of food ethics. *Food Ethics* 1: 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41055-016-0005-x>.
- Thompson, M.S. 2020. Milk and the motherland? Colonial legacies of taste and the law in the anglophone Caribbean. *Journal of Food Law & Policy* 16: 135–157.
- Thompson, M.S., A. Cochrane, and J. Hopma. 2020. The democratization of food: The case for a deliberative approach. *Review of International Studies* 46 (4): 435–455. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210520000017>.
- Tisenkopfs, T., E. Kilis, M. Grivins, and A. Adamsone-Fiskovica. 2019. Whose ethics and for whom? Dealing with ethical disputes

- in agri-food governance. *Agriculture and Human Values* 36: 353–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-019-09921-6>.
- Tronto, J.C. 1993. *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge.
- Twine, R. 2010. *Animals as biotechnology ethics, sustainability and critical animal studies*. London: Routledge.
- Wagenaar, J.P.T.M., and J. Langhout. 2007. Practical implications of increasing ‘natural Living’ through suckling systems in organic dairy calf rearing. *NJAS - Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences* 54 (4): 375–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1573-5214\(07\)80010-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1573-5214(07)80010-8).
- Wilkie, R. 2005. Sentient commodities and productive paradoxes: The ambiguous nature of human-livestock relations in northeast Scotland. *Journal of Rural Studies* 21: 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2004.10.002>.
- White, R.J. 2009. Introduction. *Journal of Critical Animal Studies* VII (1): 4–8.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Merisa S. Thompson is a Lecturer in Gender and Development at the University of Birmingham, UK, in the International Development Department. Her work examines the gendered political economy of food production, distribution and consumption in the UK, Caribbean and globally.