Interview with Clara (pseudonym), animal technician

15th March 2022, in-person at participant’s place of work.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: What motivated you to pursue this career?

P: In all honesty, I never saw myself doing this specific job. But I went to uni and always wanted to work with animals. Opened kind of like my not my knowledge, but like my understanding of what kind of jobs are out there. And I remember seeing this job description. I had never worked with livestock properly before, I'd done it like a little bit of, you know, kind of like the volunteering stuff. I thought it would be quite, uh, interesting to work with livestock and ended up being placed here. Which I like a lot. I work a lot with the pigs, cows and sheep and I really enjoy it. I’ve always wanted to work with animals, so I suppose that’s my motivation really, because I just love doing it. Even though you’re shoveling poo most of the day! I really enjoy it.

K: What work experience did you have specifically with pigs before?

P: Well, I didn't really. My background, if you can call it that, is dogs really. So, I worked at kennels a lot through uni and as I finished, I worked at a kennels for about a year or so. I find that pigs are very similar, I think that’s why I like them so much, because I like dogs so much. They kind of have their individual personalities and have a lot of characteristics which I look at and think, I really like that. I feel like you can develop quite a good relationship with them because they give you a lot back. Body language, noises, all that kind of thing – you can kind of read them. Animals with less of that, it's harder to build a bond, if you know what I mean.

K: Do you find it easy to build a bond with the pigs here?

P: Yeah, I do find it easy. As you saw, they interact quite a lot with people. They're so inquisitive, they will come over to you and get in your face a bit and give you like, they are very interactive. Sheep and cows, which like I do love. I think they're cool, but they do stay away from people more, I guess they see you as a threat rather than being inquisitive. But yes, I find pigs are more interested in people than other animals.

K: How have you learned to care for pigs on a day-to-day basis?

P: So, when I started, I shadowed my now friend. She showed me the ropes basically... how to do basic husbandry, cleaning out, things like that. She’s got pretty high standards in a good way, so I like to set myself to kind of meet that, and she’s had so much experience with pigs. She’s done farrowing, things like that. So, learning from her has been really beneficial for me, because she just knows a lot about pigs so it’s easy to ask questions and get good answers, she knows what she is talking about when it comes to welfare issues, or yeah, anything to do with pigs really. After I shadowed her, you get signed off as trained and competent to look after pigs. From then on, you kind of go at it alone and learn day to day. The more you work with them specifically, especially the girls who are here for like a few years, the more you kind of learn their individual personalities and what works for them and what doesn’t. What they do and don’t like. I guess it’s harder to do that for the younger pigs because they’re not here as long, only like 2-3 weeks, maybe a month tops. You do get to know their personalities, but then they go. But yeah.

K: So, you have different bonds with the ones that are here for longer?

P: I would probably say so, yeah. I still enjoy having the little ones and stuff, they’re lovely. You do kind of build a bond, maybe with the bigger studies that are here like 2-3 months, we always refer to them by numbers rather than giving them names and stuff because it’s kind of frowned upon because they’re not pets. But, you kind of go in and say, for example, like Tom said this morning “oh 72 loves a belly rub” or “that one loves playing with carboard” or whatever, so you do get to know them. but you get to know and delve a bit deeper into their personalities.

K: So the ones who are here longer, do they have names?

P: No. We had some before, I think some people had given them names but no. I haven’t, I think it would be harder to let them go when they have to go. So it’s easier. But it’s almost like the numbers become their names, you know? That kind of, it goes down that route.

K: You’re still referring to them by something?

P: Yeah, it’s like a personal reference, but it’s not an actual name. I could tell you all their numbers [gestures to the stock pigs] off by heart, because it’s like remembering someone's name, but it’s not at the same time.

K: Did you find that difficult when you came here after working with dogs, who I presume had names?

P: Yeah! They were all named. I guess I didn’t really put too much thought into it to be honest. I kind of just, this is the way it is and that’s how things are. I never really thought of it, I was just told when I got here, they’re not pets, so we don’t name them. Which is fair enough. It’s a weird one. I guess it’s kind of not a big deal, but it is at the same time.

K: would you like it if you could?

P: I don’t know, I don’t think it makes too much of a difference to me. I kind of just view them all the same whether they have a name or not. I don’t know whether it specifically affects my bond with an animal. It might do with other people, because it’s more personal, but I don’t think just because they have a name, I'd feel any different towards them.

K: How do you describe pigs to others who don’t work with animals?

P: Oh god, crazy. They’re nutty! Like I say, inquisitive, er, funny, sweet, they can be naughty... I think that is a good word, because they won’t do anything they don’t want to do. Yeah, intelligent, they are clever. I think they are a lot smarter than what people give them credit for. I don’t know, I find them really clever. For example, we use clicker training for the bigger girls to get them used to being sampled and snaring situations and stuff like that, and they pick that up very quickly. I’d describe them as super similar to dogs. I think [colleague] whistles like with her fingers in her mouth and they all come running from one end of the field to the other. So, I'd say yeah, really similar to dogs. I really like them, they’re cool animals.

K: so, you can kind of build their trust and they know they will be rewarded?

P: Yeah. I always think they probably... I guess they do build a bond with people, but a lot of the time that is done through food. I don’t know if they look at me and think “oh, it’s banana lady!”, because I always give them treats. But they can recognise people who are like, gentle with them, people who are calm. Whereas you might get someone in who is not, which you do get sometimes, and you can see their whole body language change. They’re more alert, they’re like “what’s happening next?” Whereas, if you’ve got people who are chill and who they’ve had positive experiences with, they’re a lot more receptive and kind of calm in themselves.

K: Do you find that you develop those skills to be calm with them over time?

P: I don’t know really. I suppose it’s about people’s personalities too and how they deal with certain situations. I mean you kind of get, well there’s a range of personalities that work here, so you get people who are calmer, a lot more patient, and just kind of take their time with stuff. I feel that’s the ideal personality if you’re working with animals, because they’re not always going to do what you want. You can’t communicate with them and say, “can you just stand there for a minute please”. Then, you get others who probably get quite stressed and the way they deal with that stress isn’t beneficial to the situation you’re in. But I'm not saying I've never been stressed, it’s highly stressful on sample days and stuff, but I just say to myself “you have to get this done” and not let it get on top of me, because then it would detriment the animal, and the people you work with as well.

K: Have you witnessed times where maybe someone isn’t so relaxed, and it has impacted the pigs?

P: Yeah. I’d say so, when they’ve been sampled, or when people come in and they rush, they’re erratic, I think the pigs get a sense of that. It’s all pheromones and things like that, they must be able to tell, and people’s body language. I think they’re a lot smarter than what people think. Like us, we notice if someone’s body language is off or if they’re in a stressed mood. I think the pigs know that.

K: So how do you describe the culture of care here for pigs?

P: Varied. I think there are people here who are more into it than others. Erm. My friend made a good point before and said, for some people it’s just a job. But for others it is more of a career, where it is something, we’ve chosen to pursue, we want to do it, and we like it. Maybe for others it’s more convenience, money, that kind of stuff. I’d say more or less the people here, most do care. They do want the best. Maybe some, too much, like me, maybe I'm over the top with it. Maybe others, too little. Maybe speciesism, I think that’s the word, comes into it. I think people prefer caring for certain animals than others, they find them more difficult, or they might have a stronger affinity to some animals than others. Which I wouldn’t want to say effects people’s work, but it probably can.

K: Are there preferred species people have in general?

P: I think quite a lot of people like cows, which I can understand because they’re lovely and very easy to deal with, easy to handle, just an easy species really. They’re quite dopey too, which is sweet. I think pigs are a bit like marmite for a lot of people, you either love them or hate them, but that’s down to people and their preferences and stuff.

K: Why would people not like them?

P: I think difficult to handle, noisy, they are independent, they do what they want. Like I said earlier about cows and sheep, they’ll follow a dominant, like a leader and the whole herd will do the same thing. If you’re moving one way, the others will follow. Which does happen with the pigs as they feel comfortable together, but if one wants to act out, I feel it’s more obvious that they will act out. They’re just a bit more difficult to handle and deal with. Like I said, they’re more independent.

K: So, what kind of standards of care do you have here?

P: like set ones?

K: yeah.

P: I don’t know to be honest. I don’t know if there’s like a threshold you have to meet. I know in my interview they ask if you’ve got a background with animals and stuff, but it’s not really, you’re not like vetted, you know what I mean? To see if you care, well not when I was interviewed. It was like “do you know about this? Do you know about that?” to kind of see if you are suitable for the job, then they assess you on different behaviours and how you can apply that. But I don’t know if we’ve got a certain standard, I know we’ve got the laws and legislations and all of that and how to care, and what has to be done. I guess that’s a bare, bare minimum.

K: So, do you have more personal approaches to how you like to care?

P: Yeah, yeah. I think it is very personal the way people do things.

K: How do you describe your approach?

P: I’d say I'm pretty caring. I try a lot with them. Without the animals here, we wouldn’t have a job. I think, they don’t choose to be here, so it’s better to make their life as good as it can be before they have to be put to sleep. Or when they’re on study, the way the vaccines might make them feel, like they don’t choose to go through all this life process so it’s nice to do things to enhance and enrich their life.

K: You said you’d like to do more enrichment with them. Are there any other challenges you face in providing the care you’d ideally like to?

P: I suppose, yeah, but that’s more I guess just people’s different opinions. Having a lot of personalities working in a certain area, everyone has their own way of doing things. I’m not saying everything I do is correct because I'm still learning. But I'd never do anything to not do my best. But then, yeah, it’s all individual I think, depends on who you are and how much you care.

K: Do you think there are opportunities to provide better care that aren’t being explored?

P: Yeah, possibly. I don’t want to speak out of term, but like small things, it comes down to money, time, all those factors. It’s kind of ‘in a perfect world’... but we don’t live in a perfect world so we can’t do what we want all the time, which I do understand. It’s kind of just making compromises.

K: What kind of compromises?

P: Like I say about the enrichment stuff, obviously financially, not being able to kind of get things you would maybe want to implement. Although, we have decided to set up a research thing to see what enrichment would be most beneficial to kind of like cut the cost of buying loads of it, which is a practical way of looking at it. That compromises, financially you’re not spending loads of money on lots of stuff the pigs aren’t going to use, but they are also getting enrichment. So, I suppose it’s a meet in the middle thing which is good.

K: How is that being done?

P: It’s an internal study. We were going to do one here in this building when we get a new pig project in, and at the other facility. We were going to draw up a study design and go through it and see the results tell us and go from there, buy whatever they like the most. We need to find things that are more durable as well, because like a carboard box, we will put it in, and they play with it for like 15 minutes and it’s absolutely destroyed. But I think like people don’t know about their activity budgets, so people don’t know how much time pigs need to spend being active to be enriched. So just playing it by ear. I think there’s a lack of research that’s been done in laboratory settings, compared to on farms, intensive farming sort of thing.

K: So how do you describe your relationship with the pigs?

P: Good, healthy. I feel you kind of know your boundaries with them, sometimes you do have to set boundaries with them when they’re misbehaving or whatever.

K: What boundaries?

P: Obviously no biting, for health and safety. Not letting them get away with being naughty... I guess like backing away from them if they’re being too much. Obviously, they’ve got boundaries and if we’re pushing and pushing and pushing them then they will snap, so I avoid getting to that with them. Just being cautious.

K: Do you think with the pigs on study that your relationship changes as they progress through?

P: Yeah. Normally they come in and they’re super scared and don’t want to go near you and you’re the scariest thing ever. As you go through, they become more confident and understand I'm going to bring them food and water, clean them out and whatever. So yeah, I'd say it does change and develop as you go through it.

K: Do you think there are ways to make the process more pleasant for pigs?

P: Yeah, training and positive reinforcement with sampling. Like I said with the clicker training, getting them used to situations. Socialisation, so like, giving them different things in their environment that they can either play with or investigate so they know not all novel situations are scary and are not going to bring about stress. Just positive reinforcement really, food. It’s what they live for. If you ever want to do anything with a pig, just use food, they will do it.

K; So, you feel like you advocate for their enrichment more because they’re giving something up to be here?

P: Yeah.

K: How do you identify when a pig is in pain or distressed?

P: Well, other than squealing... body language, like lethargy, really kind of isolating themselves from other pigs, not eating, not drinking, lame, coughing... all those kinds of symptoms really.

K: Are there common problems with the pigs?

P: lameness with the pigs, either them fighting or mounting each other, they might twist something. Hernias, with the younger ones.

K: and how are they managed?

P: well, the onsite vets, if we spot any in pain, we can call them and they will come down, often give them Metacam or something, then they get rested. See if they get any better.

K: So, what does care look like towards the end of the trial?

P: I think it stays the same, I don’t really view them any differently from when they come in to when they leave. I give them the same care all the way through. I guess for them, it might be less stressful towards the end, when the sampling is done, but that is study dependent.

K: So, the pigs that went this morning. How does that feel for you?

P: it’s always sad, but I guess you do have to try and compartmentalize stuff, think that they’ve done their job now. It is sad, this is the part of the job I hate, but it’s kind of got to happen I suppose which is sad.

K: How are they put to sleep?

P: So, they go to the postmortem room. I haven’t actually seen the whole process, but it’s often like captive bolt and stunning which I've seen on TV, but I could not watch in real life. It’s quite sad, but I try not to think about that kind of side of it. I kind of care for them and then yeah... it’s just not nice. I mean if you could, if it could be different that would be different. Go to like a sanctuary or go somewhere and chill. But there’s not the land for it here. I think as well, when we get pigs in, they might be a surplus of the meat market. With cows as well, come in from a dairy herd, like the calves or whatever. They have a purpose, they’re not just being killed because they’re not needed, you know? They’re being used for a purpose, and they’ve served their purpose.

K: So, would there be possibility for the bigger pigs to be rehomed if they are not needed for samples?

P: Yeah, I don’t know what the policy is. If you could reuse or rehome them... you probably could. I don’t know who would take them, possibly a sanctuary, but I don’t know how much research is done, it’s above my paygrade I suppose. I don’t know how much research is done and whether they can actually be rehomed.

K: Do you think that would provide you comfort?

P: Probably, yeah, just knowing they can go live out their life somewhere and just chill for the rest of it. Again, it comes down to money and time, are people gonna wanna take on four pigs? Or two of them going off in a pair? They completely and utterly destroy fields. They like doing it, but you never know. I would if I could! I’d take them, set them free.

K: So maybe more funding could be directed to that?

P: That would be good if something could be applied nationally for all animals really. I understand a lot of the time dogs in research can be rehomed. And other ex-research animals. But again, that’s speciesism. People would rather rehome a dog than a pig. Maintenance and things like that. Is there enough people who would want that to happen?

K: Do you mean the public?

P: Yeah, and also people who would take on the animals and spend time and money with them with no financial reward. Most people don’t have the time, money or land for pigs. We need all the millionaires in the world to open up pig sanctuaries, then you’ll be fine!

K: So, is it difficult when the stock pigs go off to PM compared to the study pigs?

P: I’d say so. We had two that went off last year, and that was really sad. Especially for [colleague], she found that difficult because she’d been with them and seen them grow from when they were tiny, they were here for three years. I only came in towards the end of their life, so I’ve not really experienced it from day 1. Even the girls we have now, I think I've been here a year and they’ve been here for two. But I still have a big relationship with them, and it will be sad because you get given a study that you oversee here. So those little ones, we have them for about fourteen weeks, you build a relationship going in there every day, feeding and nurturing them. Looking out for them. It’s a little bit maternal. I would say it would be more difficult with the stock pigs than the tiny pigs, but it is still sad either way.

K: How do you cope with the sadness?

P: You kind of just brush it away, it’s part of the job. It is sad. But you kind of become habituated to it after a while because it is what it is. It is sad to say but, what else can you do?

K: Has your thoughts on that changed since you first started here?

P: Yeah. I think I've become a lot more accustomed to it. I know it’s going to happen, it’s part of the job. When I first started I was like “oh no that’s so sad”. But because it’s so often, you get used to it.

K: Do you think there’s enough emotional support?

P: I suppose so, we get Headspace, the app. There’s always emails and stuff going out, it’s like support is here if you need it. We have occupational health, mental wellbeing and everything. But I don’t know how supportive it actually is.

K: Do you think pigs are suited to the research world?

P: I guess yeah. I’ve never worked with anything in this kind of setting that isn’t a cow, pig or sheep.

K: Why?

P: They are just very affectionate, and I guess easy to interact with, because most of the time they do actually like human interaction

K: Do you think public perceptions of research are reflective of the reality?

P: No. I would say before I worked here I probably had very different perceptions. You imagine small cages... I didn’t really know places like this existed. I didn’t think about livestock being used in research and how they would be housed and cared for. Working here really opened my eyes to that. For the public, the screaming of pigs is so awful, it’s horrible. If you hear that... like we’ve had a few times when contractors are doing something on site and we’re pig sampling and you can see them thinking “what’s going on in there?” It sounds so awful, even though they’re kind of just standing there. We’re not beating them up or anything! 90% of the time they are here, they are just living life and cared for. It’s just half an hour when they're being sampled. It’s difficult, because we keep so much from the public in terms of how things are done, because it has to be secretive, I think that makes it difficult to truly show people how things go on. It will always be the worst case scenario that goes out in the papers. It’s negative, negative, negative. But if you actually lived a life in the day of an animal tech, you’d understand we do care. So, I get that question a lot outside of work, people say, because I'm vegetarian, people say to me “how are you vegetarian but you work with animals in research?”. I’m like, because I see the bigger picture of it. Those four pigs have probably helped thousands. Same with the cows for foot and mouth. Those 5 cows have done the safety study have helped herds in Africa. I think that’s what drives me in this job. It should be more expressed to the public, this is why we do what we do. It’s not terrible. I feel it just gets a bad rap a lot of the time. Yeah, some of the stuff we do isn’t pretty and it’s not nice but where do you think vaccines are developed? How can you check if they’re safe? It's a big debate.

K: That sounds difficult to navigate in your life

P: When people ask what I do, I’m like “errrr, basically I’m an animal technician.” and they ask what that means and I just say I take care of animals, because you end up constantly getting into deep discussions about why you think that’s right. Quite a lot of people think it’s interesting, but you do get people who think it’s so awful. It’s all part and parcel of the job and knowing you will get a bit of backlash for it.

K: Do you think pigs being livestock animals makes it easier for the public to accept them in research?

P: Yeah, whereas when you get, like when you see bad news story it’s dogs or monkeys, because people are used to seeing them in zoos or as pets. Pigs, it’s difficult. Some would view them all the same but probably the majority of the population would see a difference.

K: Do you have anything to mention about any of the themes we’ve discussed?

P: Erm, I just think the pleasantness of the experience for the animal depends on the person caring for them. I think the relationship between the animal and the people is a massive part of it.

K: It seems a lot of care is driven by people like you in tech positions.

P: Yeah, I guess we’re the people on the ground doing the groundwork. The work we do is going to scientists who spend a lot of time in labs analysing data. A lot of the time I find that a lot of us here, the techs, find they [the scientists] don’t understand what goes into the groundwork to get them the results they need. Some scientists do, some maybe not so much. Kind of taken for granted a little bit sometimes. It’s like “we need this. You need to do this.” They don’t understand there’s a lot of steps involved to get to that point.

K: Do you have an example?

P: Well like study wise we have loads of meetings, before to talk about how studies will go. Sometimes we have scientists changing it, asking us to change things, and it’s like maybe they forget it’s an animal, a living thing. To them, they are just a number. But for us who work with them, we work with them because we want to, we want to care for them. It’s not all scientists, but there are a select few that will be changing study plans that aren’t in the best interest of the animal, maybe they don’t take it into consideration. So, it might be about us taking a stand and saying that’s not okay. But we must compromise. Science versus welfare. Making something that works for both. I think the bridge needs to be a bit more sturdy.

K: Is that just by better communication between techs and scientists?

P: Yeah definitely. And understanding of what each other do. I know what we do is not their job and what they do is not our job but having an understanding and an appreciation for what people do, like what it takes to get 10ml of blood from a pig. You need to understand it. They’re not always going to act how you want them to act, they can just be like “nope don’t want to do that today”. Yeah. It’s definitely communication.

K: So, if a pig is really resistant to it, does that make it harder?

P: Yeah. Physically, emotionally and mentally. If it’s physically taking its’ toll that is stressful, but I'm more worried about how long the pig is being stressed out for. If it’s being difficult and it’s taking longer than it needs to, I think that is stressful because you’re worried about the pig. That’s the same for all of us here, a lot of the time the stress is from the worry about how long it’s going to take, if the animal is ok. But also trying to do things in time for deadlines, they might need the samples by 12:30 in the afternoon. It can be hard.