

Scotland's Rural College

On-farm qualitative behaviour assessment in sheep: repeated measurements across time, and association with physical indicators of flock health and welfare

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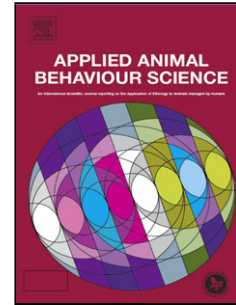
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Accepted Manuscript

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Highlights

- QBA assessments of sheep flocks over a year were compared to flock health measures
- Two dimensions of sheep expression, summarised as ‘mood’ and ‘responsiveness’
- Flock scores on both dimensions showed high consistency across the year
- Flock ‘mood’ scores correlated to flock lameness and ‘dull physical demeanour’
- Results support QBA as a meaningful, complementary sheep flock welfare indicator

Accepted Manuscript

1 **On-farm qualitative behaviour assessment in sheep: repeated measurements across time, and**
2 **association with physical indicators of flock health and welfare**

3

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16 **Abstract**

17 Qualitative Behavioural Assessment (QBA) is a ‘whole-animal’ methodology that assesses the
18 expressive qualities of animal behaviour using terms such as ‘tense’, ‘relaxed’, ‘anxious’, and
19 ‘content’. The reliability and validity of QBA as an indicator for on-farm welfare assessment in
20 pigs, cattle, poultry and sheep has been examined in a number of ways. However, the use of QBA
21 on farms over longer periods of time has not yet been examined. The aim of this study was to
22 investigate whether and how on-farm QBA of sheep varies over the different seasons of the year,
23 and whether it is associated with physical measures of sheep health and welfare such as lameness.
24 A trained assessor visited each of 12 farms six times within a one year period at two month
25 intervals, and made group level assessments of approximately 100 sheep selected *ad hoc*
26 (assuming homogeneity within the flock). The sheep flocks were assessed with a list of twelve
27 QBA descriptive terms previously developed for sheep. Following QBA, the same sheep were also
28 assessed with seven physical indicators of health and welfare (‘dull physical demeanour’,
29 lameness, breech and abdominal soiling, pruritis, wool loss, and coughing). QBA scores from all
30 visits were analysed together, and also in combination with the physical measures, with Principal
31 Component Analysis (PCA - correlation matrix, no rotation). The effect of visit on PCA flock
32 scores was analysed with random-effects multiple linear regression models. The association
33 between PCA flock scores and physical measures was investigated using Spearman rank
34 correlation (r_s), and the correlation of flock rankings across visits was examined with Kendall
35 Coefficient of Concordance. PCA distinguished two main dimensions of sheep expression: PC1
36 (47% variation) ranging from content/relaxed/thriving to distressed/dull/dejected (summarised as
37 ‘mood’) and PC2 (21%), which ranged from anxious/agitated/responsive to relaxed/dejected/dull
38 (summarised as ‘responsiveness’). No significant effect of visit on PC1 scores was found

39 (p=0.155), and PC1 flock scores correlated at $W=0.84$ ($p<0.001$) across the 6 visits, indicating high
40 consistency of characterisations of individual flock mood over the year. However there was an
41 effect of visit on PC2 scores ($p<0.001$), and PC2 flock scores were correlated at $W=0.60$ ($p<0.001$)
42 across visits, indicating that the presence of young lambs may have had a consistently relaxing
43 effect on flocks. There was also an effect of visit period on lameness ($p=0.025$), and on breech
44 ($p<0.001$) and abdominal ($p=0.0048$) soiling. With the exception of lameness and breech and
45 abdominal soiling, the physical indicators were observed at a low prevalence ($<2\%$) across the
46 study farms. The highest lameness levels were observed during the winter period (mean 17.86%,
47 95% CI 7.83 – 27.90) whilst breech soiling was highest in spring (mean 23.83%, 95% CI 11.86 –
48 35.81). An effect of farm type was found on lameness scores ($p=0.0176$) and an effect of flock size
49 on abdominal soiling scores ($p=0.025$). PC1 ‘mood’ scores were negatively correlated to the
50 proportion of lame sheep ($n=72$; $rS=-0.72$, $p<0.001$), and to the proportion of animals with dull
51 physical demeanour ($rS=-0.70$, $p<0.001$), while PC2 ‘responsiveness’ scores showed a weak
52 correlation with breech soiling ($rS=0.42$, $p<0.001$). In summary, these results suggest that QBA
53 has the potential to serve as a sensitive, meaningful indicator for on-farm welfare assessment in
54 sheep.

55

56 **Keywords:** Qualitative Behaviour Assessment; animal welfare; consistency; animal-based
57 outcomes; sheep.

58 **1. Introduction**

59 Qualitative Behavioural Assessment (QBA) is a ‘whole-animal’ methodology that assesses the
60 expressive qualities of animal behaviour using terms such as ‘tense’, ‘relaxed’, ‘anxious’, and
61 ‘content’. Thus it addresses an animal’s ‘body language’, including both negative and positive
62 aspects of well-being, and has the potential to integrate and help interpret specific clinical measures
63 of physical and psychological health (Napolitano *et al.*, 2009; Wemelsfelder & Lawrence, 2001;
64 Wiseman-Orr *et al.*, 2006). This methodology has been applied to assess animals on-farm and
65 during transport both individually and at group-level, with different livestock species such as pigs,
66 cattle, poultry and sheep (e.g. Bassler *et al.*, 2013; Rousing and Wemelsfelder, 2006; Stockman *et*
67 *al.*, 2011; Temple *et al.*, 2011; Wickham *et al.*, 2012). Generally good levels of inter-observer
68 reliability (but not always, see Bokkers *et al.*, 2012), meaningful associations with other measures
69 (but not always, see Andreasen *et al.*, 2013), as well as short assessment times, suggest this method
70 has the potential to be an effective welfare indicator that can be readily applied in the field.

71
72 In common with other global pasture-based production systems, sheep managed under British
73 farming systems spend a considerable part of the production cycle outdoors at pasture being kept in
74 specific management groups. Therefore, groups of sheep often require gathering and handling to
75 facilitate close inspection and assessment of the health and welfare of both the individual sheep
76 and the flock. Since disturbance by humans, dogs and handling can alter ovine behavioural
77 expression (Boivin *et al.*, 2000, Le Neindre *et al.*, 1996) and mask painful conditions (Fitzpatrick
78 *et al.*, 2006), it is possible that some sheep with welfare issues may be missed when gathered for
79 closer examination. Furthermore, the practicalities of assessment need to be considered for
80 different management systems. The gathering and handling of extensively-managed sheep and

81 those managed over multiple locations can be time and labour consuming and also may not be
82 appropriate at certain periods of the production calendar, for example, when ewes have young
83 lambs at foot or during the mating period. Therefore, a welfare indicator that does not involve
84 major disturbance, requires few resources, and offers valid information on the health and wellbeing
85 of groups of animals, could offer clear benefits for sheep, producers and assessors.

86

87 One major concern in the development of on-farm welfare assessment protocols is the challenge of
88 interpreting fluctuations shown by welfare indicators across time. Such fluctuations may be part of
89 normal day-to-day or seasonal variations in welfare, may reflect more serious deviations of basic
90 welfare, or could reflect the effects of varying times and contexts on repeat assessments. Thus, if
91 repeated assessments of the same farm do not show similar levels of animal demeanour, it is
92 difficult to know whether this difference reflects normal baseline variation, a welfare problem, or a
93 problem of intra-observer reliability (Temple *et al.*, 2013). The aim of this study was to apply QBA
94 to the repeated assessment of sheep at flock level in a one-year longitudinal study, to investigate
95 whether and how the sheep's expressive demeanour would be perceived by an experienced
96 assessor to vary across 6 visits at two-monthly intervals. To evaluate these assessments against
97 other welfare indicators, seven physical measures of sheep health and welfare were also examined.

98

99 **2. Materials and methods**

100

101 **2.1 Design of longitudinal study**

102 A longitudinal on-farm study performed during the period of May 2009 – April 2010 was
103 conducted on twelve farms, located in North-West England and North Wales, which had

104 previously participated in a sheep welfare research project. Farms were selected according to their
105 location, farm type and owner's informed consent to participate. Selection provided a sample of
106 eleven commercial flocks and one small-holding, including farms from hill, upland and lowland
107 areas (for details see Table 1). At each visit, each farm was asked to provide a sample of 70-100
108 sheep that were selected *ad hoc* by the farmer and left undisturbed for assessment. This sample size
109 was not related to a farm's flock size, but was based on previous experience of the assessor
110 regarding the feasibility of completing the protocol of qualitative and quantitative assessments
111 within the time limits of a day visit. The exact numbers of sheep selected at each farm for each
112 visit were recorded. The study was approved by the University of Liverpool Ethics Committee
113 (ethical review reference number RETH000287).

114
115 During the one year study, flocks were repeatedly assessed by one sheep veterinary surgeon who
116 performed all QBA and physical indicator assessments on all farms throughout the study. Repeated
117 sampling of twelve sheep flocks over 6 visits spread out over one year produced 72 on-farm
118 assessments. Flocks were visited at an interval of approximately 60 days, to coincide with key
119 periods in the sheep production cycle (Table 2). At each visit, the selected group of sheep was
120 firstly assessed using twelve QBA descriptors (relaxed, dejected, thriving, agitated, responsive,
121 dull, content, anxious, bright, tense, vigorous and distressed), which had previously been
122 developed and tested for inter-observer reliability by Phythian *et al.* (2013a). Due to their
123 integrative, qualitative nature, it is impossible to define QBA terms in precise physical terms such
124 as is done for conventional ethograms (however very recently QBA studies have begun to provide
125 brief qualitative characterisations of individual terms to enhance observer agreement). Detailed
126 instructions for how to score QBA terms were developed for the Welfare Quality® protocols for

127 cattle, pigs and poultry (Welfare Quality®, 2009), including careful reflection on, and, where more
128 than one assessor are involved, discussion of, the meaning of individual terms. These instructions
129 were followed in the present study.

130

131 The assessor quietly approached the sample group and performed assessments from a distance by
132 standing at the boundary of a field, or several metres from groups of housed animals. The exact
133 sizes of fields and assessment areas were not measured, but a number of observation points was
134 selected according to the relative size of the field and sample group, after which a 5 minute period
135 was allowed to let sheep get accustomed to the presence of the assessor. The mean number of
136 sheep assessed in any one group was 77, and ranged from a minimum group size of 24, which
137 represented all the flock of a small-holding farm, to a maximum group size of 137 animals on a
138 commercial farm. Minimal disturbances of the sheep by assessor movements, particularly in
139 situations where scrutiny of individual animals was difficult, were found to be helpful and
140 considered acceptable. The observer then spent 5 minutes at each of the observation points,
141 visually scanning the designated observation area to assess the entire sample group of sheep. When
142 observations were completed, the groups' predominant behavioural expressions were scored on
143 each of the QBA terms along a visual analogue scale (VAS) of 125 mm length, labelled from
144 'zero' to 'maximum' expression. This entire process of QBA assessment, of up to 120 sheep, took
145 on average about 30 minutes per farm.

146

147 Following completion of QBA, seven additional physical indicators of sheep health and welfare
148 were assessed at group-level by the same assessor. Whilst these physical measures were taken in
149 the same observation area as QBA, the exact observation points from which they were made

150 differed. The group of sheep was briefly observed at a distance for five minutes, and then the
151 assessor entered the assessment area to count the number of animals observed to be affected by the
152 following physical indicators (as described in Phythian et al., 2012): coughing (defined as
153 observation of one, or a combination, of the following signs: paroxysmal coughing, and respiratory
154 distress including abdominal effort associated with breathing or wheezing), lameness (any, or a
155 combination, of the following signs: ‘nodding’ of head in unison with short stride, grazing on
156 knees, uneven gait, arching of back during locomotion, non-weight bearing on affected limb when
157 standing, extreme difficulty rising, and reluctance to move once standing, as described in Kaler *et*
158 *al.*, 2009), breech soiling (discrete/solid plaques or more diffusely soiled areas of contamination by
159 faecal matter, mud or soil of the perineum and/or tailhead, and/or superficial gluteal region, and/or
160 caudal aspect of the hindlimb(s) as far as the hock), abdominal soiling (discrete/solid plaques or
161 more diffusely soiled areas of contamination by faecal matter, and/or mud, and/or soil over the
162 ventral abdomen), pruritis (one, or a combination, of the following signs: rubbing or scratching
163 against walls/posts/fences/other objects, restlessness, stamping of feet, biting and nibbling of own
164 body), wool loss (observation of small discrete areas extending to diffuse areas of fleece loss), and
165 ‘dull physical demeanour’ (defined as “an animal with lowered head carriage, showing behavioural
166 separation from the rest of the group, and unresponsive to the presence of other sheep or the
167 observer”).

168

169 **2.2 Statistical analysis**

170 QBA data for each farm were recorded by measuring the distance in millimetres between the zero
171 point of the VAS scale and the mark on the line made on the scale for each term, to provide a value
172 between 0 and 125. For physical health and welfare indicators, the percentage (%) of sheep in a

173 group showing signs of coughing, wool loss, pruritis, lameness, breech and abdominal soiling, and
174 'dull physical demeanour', was calculated for each farm assessment.

175

176 QBA data recorded over the 6 visits were analysed together using Principal Component Analysis
177 (PCA – correlation matrix, no rotation) in Minitab version 16 (Minitab, Inc, State College, PA).
178 PCA identifies the least number of components that explain most of the variance in the data
179 (Jolliffe, 2002). QBA PC1 and PC2 accounted for a cumulative variance $\geq 68\%$, hence two
180 components were retained in subsequent analyses. The correlation between each QBA term and
181 PC1 and PC2 is contained in the loading values, which reflect the weighting of each term within
182 each component. In addition, a combined PCA analysis (correlation matrix, no rotation) was
183 performed by analysing data on all 19 variables (12 QBA terms and 7 physical indicators) gathered
184 over the 6 visits.

185

186 To investigate whether PC1 and PC2 scores for the 12 flocks differed in ranking over the 6 visits,
187 Kendall coefficient of concordance (W) was calculated (n=12). Correlations of PC1 and PC2 flock
188 scores with the outcomes of physical health and welfare indicators were examined using
189 Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rS, n=72), and the distributions of QBA PC1, PC2 and
190 physical indicator scores for each farm over the 6 visits were examined graphically.

191

192 To investigate whether there was a significant effect of visit period on QBA and physical indicator
193 scores, mixed effects linear regression models were fitted in Stata version 13.1 (StataCorp LP,
194 College Station, TX). Visit period (n=6; Table 1) was included as a fixed effect, and farm identity
195 as a random effect. Farm type (categorised for the purposes of analysis as 1. lowland or 2. hill and

196 upland) and flock size (categorised as ≤ 100 , 101 – 350, 351 – 650, 651 – 950 and 951 – 1250
197 sheep) were also included as covariates in the mixed effects models. Visit period (1 to 6) was
198 included as a repeated measure within-farm. To ensure the robustness of regression models, an
199 auto-regression correlation was also fitted in the order of 1. Models examined the effect of visit
200 period on both the QBA PC1 and PC2 scores, and on the combined QBA/physical indicator PC1
201 and PC2 scores. However, due to paucity of data for several physical indicators only those
202 indicators observed at a prevalence $>2\%$ (lameness, and breech and abdominal soiling) were
203 included. The models' outcomes were described using coefficient β (indicating the magnitude of
204 the effect), a 95% confidence interval (CI), and Wald p-values (Long and Freese, 2006). To assess
205 the effect of visit period, the baseline ($\beta=0$) for comparison of coefficient values for each visit
206 period was set as visit 1 (May-June 2009). Lowland farms and flocks with less than 100 sheep
207 were set as the baseline values ($\beta=0$) for comparing the effects of farm type and flock size
208 respectively.

209

210 3. Results

211 A total of 5740 sheep (aged > 1 year) and lambs (aged > 12 weeks) were assessed, using QBA and
212 7 physical indicators of sheep health and welfare. Over the six visits the total number of sheep
213 presented for assessment on each farm were: farm 1 = 481, farm 2 = 552, farm 3 = 216, farm 4 =
214 447, farm 5 = 428, farm 6 = 567, farm 7 = 439, farm 8 = 525, farm 9 = 553, farm 10 = 529, farm
215 11 = 471 and farm 12 = 532. The total number of sheep assessed per visit varied: visit 1: n = 1182,
216 visit 2; n = 1133, visit 3, n = 990; visit 4, n = 780; visit 5, n = 709; and visit 6, n = 946.

217

218 3.1 QBA and physical health indicator outcomes

219 PCA identified two principal components (PC) which together explained 68% of the variation
220 between farms (Fig. 1). PC1 (47% variation) ranged from ‘content/relaxed/thriving’ to
221 ‘distressed/dull/dejected’ (summarised as ‘mood’), while PC2 (21%) ranged from
222 ‘anxious/agitated/responsive’ to ‘relaxed/dejected/dull’ (summarised as ‘responsiveness’). The
223 proportion of sheep observed with signs of each physical indicator varied between individual
224 farms. Across the entire study period, at the level of the individual farm, ‘dull physical
225 demeanour’ ranged from 0 (minimum) to 15% (maximum), coughing from 0% to 38.55%, wool
226 loss from 0% to 11.54%, pruritis 0 to 2.88%, lameness 1.23% to 61.86%, whilst breech and
227 abdominal soiling ranged from 0 to 59.68% and 0 to 100% respectively. In addition, as can be
228 seen from Table 3, there was seasonal variation between different visits in the mean proportion
229 of affected sheep for all study farms.

230

231 **3.2 Effects of visit period**

232 Overall, regression modelling identified no significant effect of visit periods 1-6 on PC1 flock
233 scores when QBA scores were evaluated independently ($p=0.155$), nor when analysed together
234 with physical indicator outcomes ($p=0.1982$). This result indicates that the perceived mood of
235 sheep flocks was relatively stable across the year. By contrast, there was a significant effect of visit
236 period on PC2 scores for both the independent QBA PC2 scores ($p<0.001$), and the combined
237 QBA/physical indicator PC2 scores ($p<0.001$). More detailed results for the random-effects models
238 are shown in Table 4, which show that the lowest β coefficient values for PC2 scores were
239 associated with visit 1 (May/June 2009) and visit 6 (March/April 2010), indicating that flocks
240 appeared relatively more relaxed and less agitated over the lambing and post-lambing period than
241 at other times of year. The significant correlations between the rankings of flocks on PC1 and PC2

242 across the 6 visits indicate that the relative characterisations of flock expression on the two QBA
243 dimensions did not significantly change over the year (PC1: $W=0.84$, $p<0.001$; PC2: $W=0.60$,
244 $p<0.001$). As regards physical indicators, there was an effect of visit period on lameness and
245 breech and abdominal soiling scores. The highest level of lameness (17.86%) was recorded in the
246 winter months (visit 5), breech soiling (23.83%) was highest at visit 1 in the spring period (Table
247 4), and the highest levels of abdominal soiling (20.17%) occurred during the autumn/winter period
248 (visit 4).

249

250 **3.3 Effects of farm type and flock size**

251 An effect of farm type was found on QBA PC1 scores in which hill/upland flocks received higher
252 PC1 scores (β 2.47, 95% CI 0.54 – 4.38, $p=0.017$), and were thus perceived as more
253 ‘content/relaxed/thriving’, compared to the lowland flocks in this sample (β -1.21, 95% CI -2.57–
254 0.14). There was also an effect of farm type on lameness scores, indicating that hill/upland flocks
255 showed lower levels of lameness (β -9.70, 95% CI -17.72 – -1.68, $p=0.0176$) than lowland flocks
256 (β 18.32, 95% CI 12.66 – 23.99). There was one effect of flock size: larger flocks with 951–1250
257 sheep showed higher levels of abdominal soiling (β 28.28, 95% CI 1.94 – 29.17 $p=0.025$) than
258 flocks with less than 100 sheep (β 0, 95% CI -11.12 – 11.11). No significant interaction effects
259 were found.

260

261 **3.4 Associations between QBA and physical health indicators**

262 Fig. 2 shows PC1 and PC2 of the combined PCA of QBA and physical indicator scores. This graph
263 illustrates a close alignment of the negative end of PC1 (distressed/dull/dejected) with the
264 prevalences of lameness ($rS=-0.72$, $p<0.001$), and ‘dull physical demeanour’ ($rS=-0.70$, $p<0.001$).

265 This association is supported by significant correlations of lameness with individual QBA terms
266 ‘distressed’ ($rS=0.50$, $p<0.001$), ‘dull’ ($rS=0.57$, $p<0.001$), and ‘dejected’ ($rS=0.57$, $p<0.001$), and
267 by a correlation of ‘dull physical demeanour’ with individual QBA terms ‘distressed’ ($rS=0.70$,
268 $p<0.001$), ‘dull’ ($rS=0.74$, $p<0.001$), and ‘dejected’ ($rS=0.66$, $p<0.001$). In addition there was a
269 weak but significant correlation between the negative end of PC2 (relaxed/dejected/dull) and
270 breech soiling ($rS=0.42$, $p<0.001$).

271
272 Fig. 3 presents a visual image of the distributions of QBA PC1 and PC2 scores, and lameness
273 and breech soiling percentages, for each of the 12 farms across all 6 visits. This overview allows
274 closer investigation of the extent to which the PC scores of different farms remained stable, or
275 shifted up or down the expressive dimensions. Thus some farms (e.g. farm 3 in Fig.3) did not
276 vary much in their PC1 and PC2 positions over the year, whereas other farms showed more
277 variation over time (e.g. farm 4). The majority of flocks stayed located on either the positive or
278 negative side of PC1, and thus appeared to be quite consistent in general mood (as supported by
279 a high Kendall W for PC1 of 0.84). On PC2 there was more variation for some farms (e.g. farms
280 4 and 5), reflected in a somewhat lower, but still significant, Kendall W value (0.60). The effect
281 of farm type on QBA PC1 scores and lameness scores reported above can also be seen in this
282 graph: hill farm flocks (farms 3, 9, 10, 11, and 12) were assessed as relatively content, relaxed
283 and thriving compared to lowland flocks (farms 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7), and also showed
284 consistently lower levels of lameness across visits than lowland flocks. Particularly in flocks 1
285 and 4 the association between low PC1 scores/negative mood and high levels of lameness is
286 evident.

287

288 4. Discussion

289 This study applied qualitative behaviour assessment (QBA) to the on-farm assessment of sheep
290 welfare, using a list of QBA terms developed for sheep by Phythian *et al.*, (2013a). The emphasis
291 in this study was on repeated QBA assessment of sheep flocks across time, over 6 visits at two-
292 monthly intervals, on 12 hill and lowland farms in the UK. The study's aims were to assess
293 whether and how QBA, applied by an experienced assessor, was capable of detecting differences
294 in sheep behavioural expression over time, and was associated with physical health measures
295 taken at the same time points. Multivariate analysis identified two main dimensions of sheep
296 expression: PC1, ranging from content/relaxed/thriving to distressed/dull/dejected (summarised
297 as 'mood'), and PC2, ranging from anxious/agitated/responsive to relaxed/dejected/dull
298 (summarised as 'responsiveness'). These dimensions correspond well to those found (dim1:
299 content/relaxed/bright to distressed/dejected/tense; dim2: agitated/responsive/anxious to
300 dull/dejected/relaxed) in a study by Phythian *et al.* (2013a), in which 13 veterinary and farm
301 assurance assessors provided QBA, using the same terms as the current study, of 12 video clips
302 showing sheep in varying indoor and outdoor situations and housing conditions. This
303 convergence supports the relevance of these dimensions for characterising sheep expressions in
304 varying on-farm conditions.

305
306 Previous QBA studies (e.g. Rutherford *et al.*, 2012) have frequently found two main dimensions
307 of behavioural expression, where the first dimension corresponds to a distinction between
308 positive and negative experience, and the second dimension appears to distinguish between low
309 and high levels of arousal/activation in these experiences. The dimensions identified in the
310 present study concur with this pattern, with positive and negative descriptors aligning on

311 opposite sides of PC1, and high-arousal/activation terms (e.g.: agitated, responsive) placed on the
312 opposite side to low-arousal terms (e.g.: relaxed, dull) on PC2. The four quadrants thus formed
313 appear to fit in well with the integrative functional framework for emotion and mood proposed
314 by Mendl *et al.* (2010), supporting our summarising labels of PC1 and PC2 term-loadings as
315 ‘mood’ and ‘responsiveness’. This is not the place to discuss the relationship of QBA with
316 cognitive or motivational theoretical frameworks of emotion, and we do not wish to suggest that
317 QBA studies actually measure any cognitive or motivational states inferred by such frameworks;
318 however QBA assessments of animals’ dynamic expressive demeanour do generally appear to be
319 compatible with these frameworks (Boissy *et al.*, 2007; Mellor, 2012).

320

321 **4.1 Detecting differences over time**

322 This study’s outcomes indicate that on average, PC1 flock scores (whether QBA scores were
323 evaluated independently or combined with physical indicator outcomes) did not differ across the
324 6 visits made in the course of a year, while the rankings of flocks on PC1 were highly correlated
325 across visits. Together these findings indicate a high consistency of QBA assessments of the
326 flocks’ mood over the course of the year. To our knowledge, only one previous on-farm study
327 with pigs has investigated repeated application of QBA over a longer time period, finding
328 moderate correlation ($r_S=0.50$) between the PC1 scores generated by two visits (1 year apart) to
329 the same 15 intensive pig farms (Temple *et al.*, 2013). The authors of the pig study rightly note
330 that when using one assessor, it is not possible to tell whether lack of good correlation is due to
331 poor intra-observer reliability or to a genuine change in the animals’ state. Weaker correlations
332 may also reflect a lack of sufficient between-farm variation in the same production system. The
333 present sheep study assessed the same farms 6 rather than 2 times a year, and included farms

334 from different production systems, allowing closer examination of variation between and within
335 farms. The high consistency found in PC1 farm scores across visits, both within and between
336 farms, suggests that the flocks' mood remained relatively stable on most farms across the study
337 period.

338

339 PC2 flock scores (responsiveness) did show significant variation across visits, with the lowest
340 scores (i.e. most relaxed/dejected/dull) recorded post-lambing in May/June (visit 1), and at the
341 2010 lambing season (visit 6). An explanation for this might be that the presence of lambs less
342 than 12 weeks old had a relaxing effect on sheep, due to physiological changes associated with
343 maternal bonding behaviours such as licking and grooming of lambs (Dwyer *et al.*, 2008). It is
344 also conceivable that variations in sheep responsivity reflected arbitrary differences in how sheep
345 were selected for assessment by farmers. However, there were no signs of deliberate bias in how
346 farmers selected sample animals. Moreover, as management practices tend to affect the whole
347 flock rather than specific animals, repeated assessment of different groups of sheep from the
348 same farm was considered to provide a representative sample of the flock. This view is supported
349 by our finding that the rankings of individual sheep flocks on PC2, like those on PC1, were
350 significantly correlated across the 6 visits.

351

352 Levels of lameness and breech and abdominal soiling varied over the year. The mean lameness
353 level of 7.23% observed during the first visit period (May/June 2009) is close to the mean
354 lameness estimate of 7.10% previously identified during a cross-sectional study on 40 English
355 and Welsh sheep farms (Phythian *et al.*, 2013b). However, at 13.39% the mean level of lameness
356 for all flocks observed across the whole study period is considerably higher than previously

357 reported, but does concur with King and Green's (2011) conclusions regarding the true
358 prevalence of flock lameness in England. The high lameness levels observed in the current study
359 may reflect the convenience-based approach to farm sampling, or be due to specific disease
360 outbreaks in these flocks. High prevalence of lameness appears to coincide with periods of
361 gathering, handling, and housing of animals, which favour the transmission of infectious causes
362 of ovine lameness such as footrot (Raadsma and Egerton, 2013). Indeed in the current study the
363 highest levels of lameness were recorded during autumn, coinciding with the mating period, and
364 in winter, when most sheep flocks were housed. Follow-up veterinary examination after
365 assessments were completed indicated that farms with high lameness prevalence showed high
366 levels of infectious footrot, and problems with controlling an outbreak of contagious ovine
367 digital dermatitis were thought to explain the very high (up to 61.86%) lameness levels recorded
368 on farm 1. The increased level of breech soiling at the spring visit may be due to changes in
369 nutrition, and to the greater parasite challenges of the spring grazing season. On the other hand,
370 the higher level of abdominal soiling observed in the winter period may relate to the wet weather
371 conditions experienced by some sheep flocks that had not yet been winter housed.

372

373 **4.2 Effects of farm type and flock size**

374 There were effects of farm type on both QBA and physical indicator scores. Flocks on
375 hill/upland farms were assessed as more content, relaxed and thriving (PC1) than lowland flocks.
376 This may reflect a difference between extensive and intensive management practices, but could
377 also reflect the effects on welfare of differences in physical health. Indeed, we found that hill
378 farm flocks showed consistently lower levels of lameness than lowland farms, and there was a
379 significant negative correlation between PC1 mood scores and lameness (for further discussion

380 of this association see below). Thus the hill farms selected for this study appeared to have a
381 higher health and welfare status than the lowland farms, however, the study's non-random
382 sampling approach, and the small sample of 12 farms, prevent a more general interpretation of
383 these findings in terms of sheep welfare in different production systems. The difficulty of
384 establishing larger samples with sufficient farm-level variation is a common feature of applied
385 on-farm research (Andreasen *et al.*, 2013).

386

387 There was no significant effect of farm type or flock size on the sheep's responsiveness (PC2);
388 however visual inspection of PC2 scores (Fig. 3) suggests some meaningful variation at
389 individual farm level: sheep on a small-holding in a hill area (farm 3), which were regularly
390 handled and petted, appeared consistently more relaxed than sheep on hill farms under more
391 extensive management (farms 9-12). This difference may reflect the positive effect of handling
392 on welfare (Boivin *et al.*, 2003), and suggests that QBA can generate expressive dimensions on
393 which management practices can be meaningfully evaluated. However further study with larger
394 sample sizes is required to support these findings. There was one effect of flock size on physical
395 health, with large flocks (950-1250 sheep) showing a higher prevalence of abdominal soiling
396 than sheep in small flocks (less than 100 sheep), which may reflect the greater exposure of large
397 extensively managed commercial flocks to environmental and climatic conditions. However here
398 too, further study with larger sample sizes is required.

399

400 **4.3 Associations between QBA and physical health indicators**

401 Of the seven physical indicators of sheep health and welfare recorded, only the proportion of lame
402 sheep on a farm, and the proportion of sheep recorded with 'dull physical demeanour', correlated

403 significantly with PC1 mood scores, indicating that flocks with high levels of lameness and dull
404 physical postures were perceived as more distressed/dull/dejected than other flocks. Indeed visual
405 inspection of individual farm scores (Fig. 3) indicates that farms with consistently low mood scores
406 (e.g. farms 1 and 4) showed high levels of lameness. Lameness is a key welfare issue for sheep,
407 and dull physical demeanour is an attribute commonly assessed by stock-people and veterinarians
408 to detect sickness and disease. The significant association of QBA expressive dimensions with
409 these health measures supports that QBA addressed important aspects of sheep welfare, and
410 provided complementary information to help interpret the wider welfare impact of these health
411 problems. Lameness is associated with pain, however the present study described lame sheep as
412 more distressed, dull, and dejected than non-lame sheep, suggesting that lameness and the pain
413 underlying it also had a more generally deleterious effect on the sheep's emotional state. The same
414 can be said for dull physical demeanour; this is a specific physical measure usually associated with
415 sickness and pain, however the present study suggests these clinical signs also had a more
416 generally deleterious emotional effect.

417
418 One could argue that the QBA terms 'dull', 'dejected', and 'responsive' and the physical indicator
419 'dull physical demeanour' can hardly be considered independent measures, and may have been
420 subject to what Greenwald *et al.*, (1986) call 'theory confirmation bias'. However the two
421 measures were embedded in very different assessment and scoring procedures, and were not taken
422 closely together. QBA was always performed right at the start of the assessment, ensuring
423 independence of any physical measurement afterwards. Moreover, PC1 mood scores were not the
424 result of direct measurement, but the outcome of a multivariate analysis, creating more analytical
425 distance between the two types of measure. Their significant correlation was thus not pre-given,

426 but can still be considered a meaningful outcome. A good degree of association between different
427 types of measure confers an aspect of internal validity known as convergent validity (Abramson
428 and Abramson, 2008). Yet to confer validity this association does not have to be maximal, in that
429 the different types of measure address the animal welfare construct from different angles: that of
430 psychological well-being (QBA), and physical health (lameness, dull physical demeanour).

431
432 Coughing, wool-loss, abdominal soiling, and skin irritation were observed too infrequently to
433 enable meaningful correlation with QBA. Breech soiling did occur frequently, and there was a
434 weak but significant correlation between breech soiling and PC2, indicating that flocks that were
435 more relaxed were also more soiled. The reasons for this association are likely to be complex, but
436 may be related to a co-variance in time: both measures increased significantly in spring. As
437 discussed above, sheep may have become more relaxed after lambing, and this may have affected
438 their behaviour in a way (e.g. increased lying) that led to more breech soiling in wet weather
439 conditions. Breech soiling can also be influenced by seasonal dietary changes, or indicate the
440 presence of endo-parasitism or blowfly myiasis (French *et al.*, 1994), which may have caused the
441 sheep to slow down, but on these farms it did not appear to affect their welfare such that they
442 became dull and dejected, as was the case with lameness.

443
444 Thus, combining QBA with other indicators is likely to provide a fuller, more complex picture of
445 animal health and welfare (Wemelsfelder & Farish, 2004; Wemelsfelder & Mullan, 2014).
446 Through patterns of correlation, QBA can help to interpret health and behaviour measures in terms
447 of an animal's well-being, as has for example been reported for sheep (Wickham *et al.*, 2012),
448 horses (Minero *et al.*, 2009), and pigs (Rutherford *et al.*, 2012). An on-farm assessment study of 43
449 Danish dairy cattle farms found no meaningful correlations between QBA and measures of the

450 Welfare Quality® assessment protocol (Andreasen *et al.*, 2013). However, as discussed above for
451 the Temple *et al.* (2013) on-farm pig study, this may have at least partly been due to a lack of
452 sufficient between-farm variation in the study's sample. A risk factor analysis of on-farm
453 assessments of 89 commercial broiler farms in various EU countries reported some meaningful
454 associations between QBA and other measures (Bassler *et al.*, 2013). The present study included
455 farms from different sheep production systems; that despite its small sample size it found
456 significant associations between QBA and physical health measures is encouraging, and should
457 stimulate more research.

458

459 **4.4 Methodological considerations**

460 For reasons of feasibility and cost, all assessments in this study were performed by the same
461 assessor. It could be argued therefore that the repeated farm assessments were not independent, and
462 may have artificially inflated the stability of PC1 mood scores across the year. Indeed, as noted by
463 Temple *et al.* (2013), when using a single assessor it is not possible to distinguish observer from
464 farm effects, other than by consideration of a study's larger context and totality of findings.
465 However, PC2 responsiveness scores did fluctuate across visits, which suggests that the assessor
466 was not simply repeating previous scoring patterns, but was sensitive to the possibility of change
467 across visits. That the QBA dimensions found here were extremely similar to those identified from
468 video by experienced veterinary and farm assurance inspectors, also supports their relevance
469 (Phythian *et al.*, 2013a).

470

471 Another concern is that qualitative judgments are sensitive to environmental context, which can
472 both be a strength and a potential source of bias (Wemelsfelder *et al.*, 2009; Tuytens *et al.*,

473 2014; Fleming *et al.*, 2015). Random variation in on-farm conditions may have affected QBA
474 scoring levels, and it is difficult to distinguish this from meaningful variation. To counter such
475 effects, it is important to use more than one assessor, and investigate the inter-observer reliability
476 of on-farm QBA assessments (e.g. Andreasen *et al.*, 2013). However this is costly and may not
477 be feasible, and it is thus advisable to always apply QBA in combination with other health and
478 welfare measures. The potential for inadvertent observer bias is not exclusive to qualitative
479 methods, but applies equally to quantitative measures (Tuytens *et al.*, 2014). To increase the
480 robustness of on-farm welfare assessments it is crucial to use trained pools of assessors, who are
481 experienced in assessing sheep over the seasons of the year, across a range of production
482 systems, and are able to distinguish meaningful from random fluctuations in sheep expression. If
483 further research were to uphold the positive results found in this study, QBA could potentially be
484 applied as a day-to-day management tool on sheep farms, and be used to communicate welfare
485 values to farmers, shepherds, and consumers.

486

487 **4.5 Conclusion**

488 The results of this study generally indicate that QBA was capable of identifying expressive
489 dimensions that distinguished meaningfully between sheep demeanour within- and between farms
490 and across the seasons of the year, and correlated significantly with important physical indicators
491 of sheep health. A strong negative correlation was found between PC1 ‘mood’ scores and levels of
492 lameness and ‘dull physical demeanour’, indicating that the latter clinical signs of compromised
493 health also had a wider deleterious effect on the sheep’s emotional state.

494

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499

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591

592 **Figure Captions**

593 **Figure 1:** Loadings of the 12 QBA terms on PC1 and PC2 of the PCA analysis. Axes reflect
594 arbitrary scaling values.

595

596 **Figure 2:** Loadings of the combined PCA analysis of 12 QBA terms and 7 physical health
597 indicators on PC1 and PC2. Axes reflect arbitrary scaling values.

598

599 **Figure 3:** Distributions of QBA PC1 and PC2 scores, and of lameness and breech soiling
600 percentages, for the 12 sheep farms across the 6 visits. Visit periods were: 1. May-June 2009, 2.
601 July-August 2009, 3. September-October 2009, 4. November-December 2009, 5. January-
602 February 2010, and 6. March-April 2010.

603

Table 1: Overview of assessment visit periods

Visit	Study period	Season	Production stage
1	May – June 2009	Spring/Summer	Post-lambing
2	July – August 2009	Summer	Weaning
3	September – October 2009	Autumn	Mating
4	November – December 2009	Autumn/Winter	Early pregnancy
5	January – February 2010	Winter	Mid-pregnancy
6	March – April 2010	Spring	Lambing

Table 2: Study farm details

Farm ID	Farm type	Flock size	Farm purpose	Farm assurance scheme member	Farming system
1	Lowland	850	Commercial	No	Conventional
2	Lowland	260	Commercial	No	Conventional
3	Hill	24	Small-holding	No	Conventional
4	Lowland	250	Commercial	No	Conventional
5	Lowland	210	Commercial	Yes	Conventional
6	Lowland	280	Commercial	No	Conventional
7	Lowland	600	Commercial	No	Conventional
8	Upland	450	Commercial	Yes	Organic
9	Hill	320	Commercial	Yes	Conventional
10	Hill	800	Commercial	Yes	Conventional
11	Hill	1100	Commercial	Yes	Conventional
12	Hill	1260	Commercial	Yes	Conventional

Table 3: Prevalence of observed physical health and welfare indicators in 12 sheep flocks over 6 visits.

Indicator	Mean proportion of sheep affected (%) at each of the six assessment visits (95% CI)						Mean proportion (%) affected across study
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
	May-June 2009	July-August 2009	Sept-Oct 2009	Nov-Dec 2009	Jan-Feb2010	March-April 2010	
Dull demeanour	0.17 (-0.07 – 0.41)	0.71 (0.02 – 1.40)	1.62 (0.01 – 3.21)	0.64 (-0.78 – 2.06)	3.10 (0.04 – 6.17)	3.70 (-0.65 – 8.05)	1.52 (0.77 – 2.77)
Coughing	0	0.18 (-0.08 – 0.43)	0	0.13 (-0.16 – 0.41)	0.28 (-0.11 – 0.67)	0.11 (-0.12 – 0.33)	0.87 (0 – 2.03)
Pruritis	0	0.15 (-0.10 – 0.39)	0.05 (-0.07 – 0.17)	0	0	0.29 (-0.18 – 0.77)	0.12 (0.01 – 0.24)
Wool loss	1.86 (-0.65 – 4.37)	0.18 (-0.09 – 0.44)	0.40 (-0.07 – 0.88)	0	0.85 (0.13 – 1.56)	2.64 (-0.12 – 5.41)	0.74 (0.29 – 1.18)
Lameness	7.23 (3.68 – 10.78)	14.59 (8.79– 20.41)	16.77 (5.62– 27.92)	12.51 (7.14 – 17.89)	17.86 (7.83 – 27.90)	11.29 (4.45 – 18.11)	13.39 (10.53 – 16.22)
Breech soiling	23.83 (11.86 – 35.81)	12.42 (8.69– 16.15)	7.91 (3.25– 12.56)	13.92 (3.08– 24.76)	7.76 (1.28– 14.24)	14.63 (7.97 – 21.27)	13.41 (10.29 – 16.53)
Abdominal soiling	9.24 (-4.37– 22.86)	0	0.11 (-0.14 – 0.37)	20.17 (-0.74 – 41.09)	0.90 (-0.60 – 2.40)	0.37 (-0.50 – 1.20)	5.13 (1.09 – 9.18)

Table 4: Regression parameters describing the effect of visit period (1 to 6) on PC1 and PC2 flock scores, for both the QBA and combined QBA/physical indicator analyses, and for physical indicators of lameness and breech and abdominal soiling.

Principal Component	Study visit	β	95% CI	p-value
QBA PC1^a	For all 6 visits	-	-	p=0.155
QBA PC1	1	0.21	-1.11 – 1.54	-
	2	-0.55	-1.40 – 0.29	0.197
	3	-0.54	-1.47 – 0.39	0.255
	4	0.11	-0.84 – 1.06	0.817
	5	-0.56	-1.51 – 0.40	0.251
	6	0.27	-0.68 – 1.23	0.576
QBA PC2	For all 6 visits	-	-	p<0.001
QBA PC2	1	-1.25	-2.02 – -0.49	-
	2	1.82	1.14 – 2.49	<0.001
	3	2.04	1.19 – 2.89	<0.001
	4	1.93	0.99 – 2.87	<0.001
	5	1.01	0.02 – 1.99	0.046
	6	0.73	-0.29 – 1.74	0.160
Combined PC1^b	For all 6 visits	-	-	p=0.1982
Combined QBA/ physical indicators PC1	1	-0.33	-1.82 – 1.16	-
	2	0.52	-0.45 – 1.51	0.292
	3	0.60	-0.49 – 1.69	0.277
	4	-0.23	-1.34 – 0.86	0.679
	5	0.87	-0.24 – 1.99	0.125
	6	0.20	-0.91 – 1.32	0.723
Combined PC2	For all 6 visits	-	-	p<0.001
Combined QBA/physical indicators PC2	1	-1.46	1.36 – 2.79	-
	2	2.07	1.39 – 3.13	<0.001
	3	2.26	1.39 – 3.27	<0.001
	4	2.33	0.46 – 2.39	<0.001

	5	1.42	-0.31– 1.65	0.004
	6	0.67	-0.31– 1.65	0.178
	For all 6 visits	-	-	p=0.0249
Lameness	1	7.23	0.72– 13.74	-
	2	7.37	0.49– 14.23	0.036
	3	9.53	2.90– 16.17	0.005
	4	5.28	-1.37 – 11.93	0.120
	5	10.63	3.98– 17.28	0.002
	6	4.05	-2.59– 10.70	0.232
	For all 6 visits	-	-	p=0.0008
Breech soiling	1	23.83	16.92– -4.16	-
	2	-11.40	-18.65– -4.17	0.002
	3	-15.92	-24.21– -7.64	0.001
	4	-9.90	-18.49– -1.33	0.024
	5	-16.06	-24.74– -7.40	0.001
	6	-9.21	-17.90– -.51	0.038
	For all 6 visits	-	-	p=0.0048
Abdominal soiling	1	9.24	0.53 – 17.95	-
	2	-9.24	-21.64– 3.15	0.144
	3	-9.12	-21.44– 3.17	0.146
	4	10.93	-1.39– 23.25	0.082
	5	-8.34	-20.66 – 3.97	0.184
	6	-8.87	-21.19– 3.45	0.158

^a Principal Component obtained through PCA of QBA scores only

^b Principal Component obtained through PCA of QBA and physical indicator scores

Figure 1

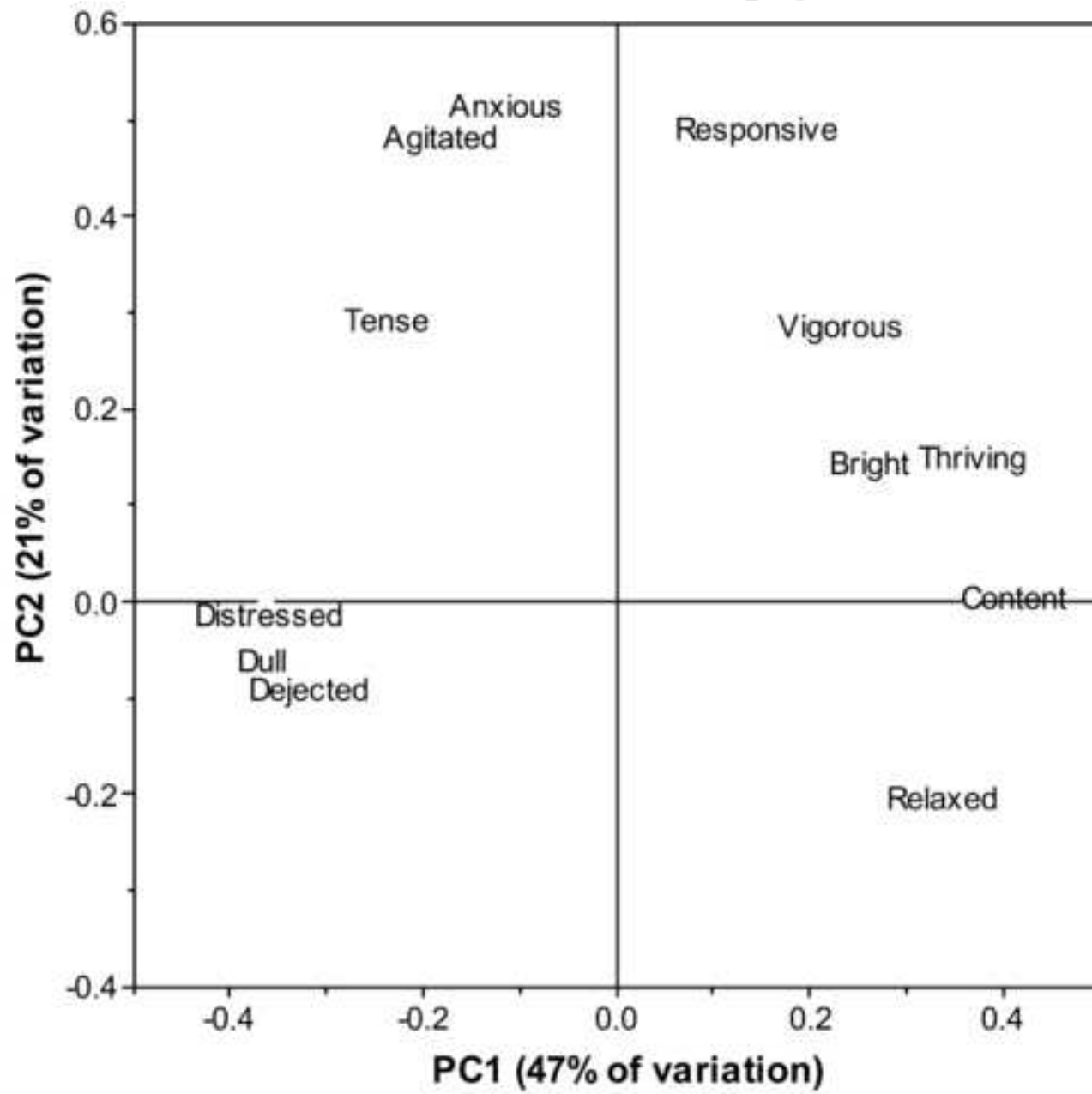


Figure 2

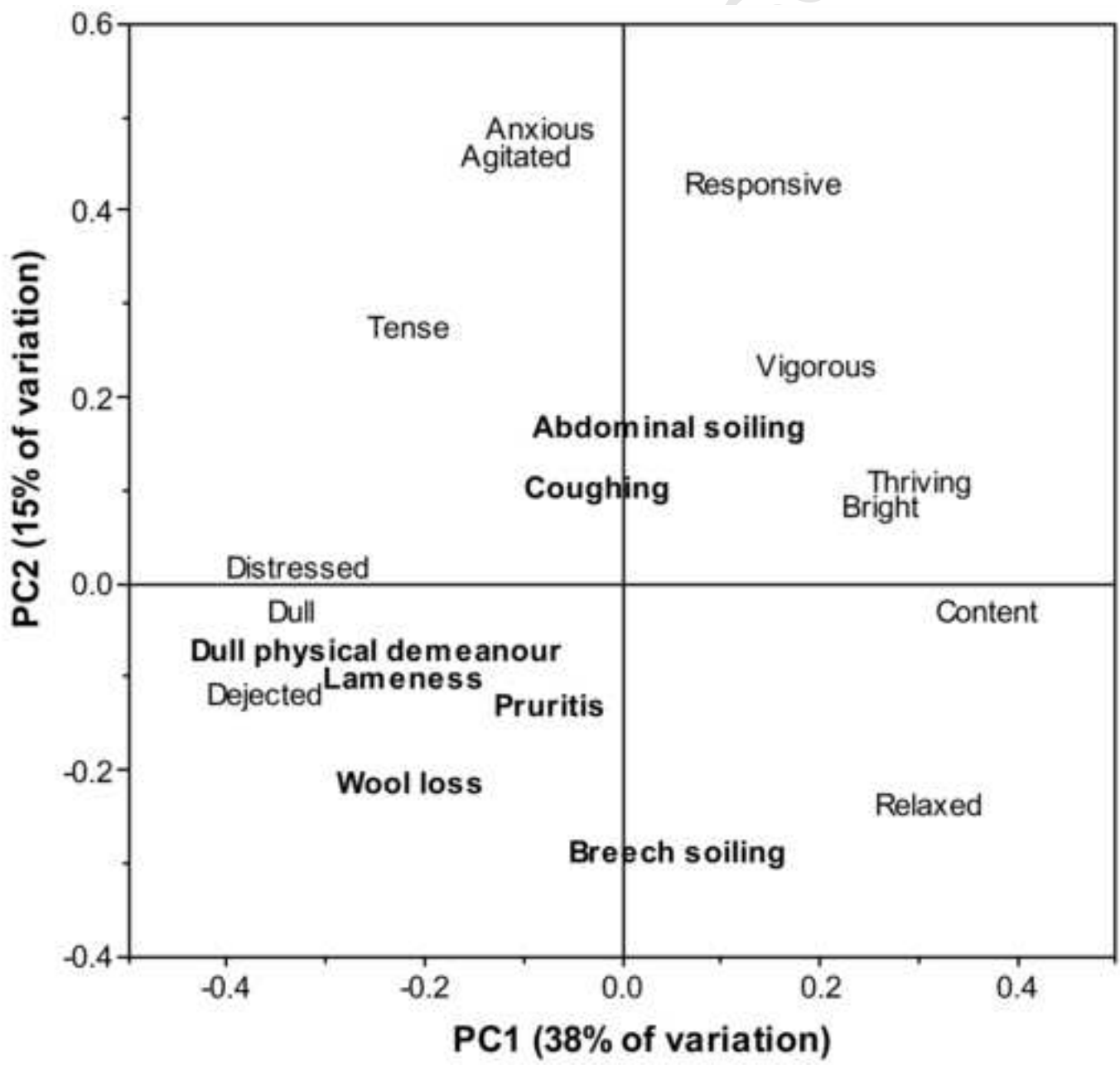


Figure 3

