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Love, Loss and Blue Ribbons

An Ethnographic Study of 4-H Animal Projects in Rural Community Fairs

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Every summer, rural America comes alive with agricultural fairs, centered around 4-H animal projects. During the course of these projects, a child raises an animal over the course of a spring and summer to be competitively judged and ultimately sold. How do children negotiate this short-term relationship with their animal? I conducted an ethnographic study of 4-H participants among Lancaster County (PA) as well as Ohio community fairs to elucidate this question and others. The experience gained during animal projects, especially showing an animal, serves as a tool to teach children about desirable, human constructed cultural traits that will help them navigate life's challenges. Additionally, children learn about foodways, material culture and community-driven aesthetic values.

The scorching, heavy August heat paralleled the fetid atmosphere on the other side of the door to the Sheep and Goat Building at an Ohio county fair in 2016. There, an event I witnessed changed my life forever and has culminated in the following paper. Up to this point, folklore was a foreign world to me. I read bits of academic books, but it was so different from my biology background that I found its concepts hard to grasp. As a result of my county fair experience, my nascent interest in folklore increased, and I was determined to explicate the scene before me. On that day, the last day of a county fair, 4-H kids and workers loaded sheep and goats on trucks, bringing the weeklong 4-H animal projects to an end. The scene was chaotic. The air was pregnant with a cacophony of children crying, sheep were bleating, adults barked orders and trailer doors slammed shut. Not all the youth were crying; I hypothesized that those who cried

were first year participants, and the more reserved children were veterans. "What an interesting idea for an ethnography," I thought. This scene fueled my desire to delve more deeply into how 4-H animal projects entangle children's lives with experiences of love and loss and affect their vernacular ontology. The raw emotion of the situation stunned me. I had seen dozens of animal shows in the past, since my interest in attending county fairs started with my first one a few years before this one. But in this moment, I confronted the reality of what happened to these animals after the shows and to the relationships that they had developed with their young keepers. How were the 4-H participants feeling during this process? I also could not help but notice that the children—and not the adults—were doing most of the work here. They were taking initiative with tasks, such as cleaning stalls, leading animals out, etc.



Figure 1: In Lebanon, PA, contestants gather at the 2021 Lebanon Area Sheep Show

Another Ohio county fair, another scene. It was a bittersweet time for me, because in one month I would move back to Pennsylvania for a new job. I lost myself in thought when I snapped back to reality while watching one of the hog shows for

Showmanship. The capstone of the 4-H animal project where a child raises an animal is to “show” the animal competitively at their local agricultural fair. In the Showmanship competition, the object is to demonstrate how well the youth manages their show animal, a testament to previous practice over the duration of the spring and summer. I was amazed at how a six-year-old could deftly oversee a hog weighing over 250 pounds. While watching the novice class showmanship event, one child, around six years old, was clearly having difficulty controlling his hog. This is understandable, as novice class youth are in their first year showing an animal. He fell to the ground and started to cry. His father walked over, crouched down, and said something I could not hear due to my distance from the ring. The boy stopped crying, got up, and stoically finished showing his hog, this time with much better control. If one scene could encapsulate what 4-H animal projects mean to children, this was one.

The relationship between the child and animal in these events is what captured my interest. What is it like to take on an animal project like this? What is the child learning, especially during the livestock judging events for which they practice all summer long? Taking place in a life moment when children are negotiating childhood, adolescence, and their place in the world, 4-H events support “character-building” and “teaching values,” but what exactly does that mean? And given what I saw of the bonds that children developed with them, what is the role of youths’ project animals in this process?

In this paper, I explore the dynamic between children and their 4-H animal projects. I want to determine the effectiveness of the animal as a tool in teaching 4-H participants. To what extent, if any, is the effect of undertaking 4-H animal projects helping children to be a productive member of their community and the larger society in which they live? To do so, I focus on the short-term relationships formed between children and animals in 4-H clubs at rural community and county fairs in both

Pennsylvania and Ohio; in this context I examine how children relate to animals and how such relations can impact cultural identity. I argue that the 4-H animal project experience is polysemous; what outsiders see as a glorified pet show has a quite different meaning for the children involved with the process. Children learn a myriad of topics, from best practices of expected community behavior to scientific knowledge, such as lessons on evolution. Additionally, children learn about folkloric topics such as foodways and material culture; the 4-H experience is not a formal course taken in school. Children learn through a combination of passed-down knowledge from more former members and through their own efforts through experiential learning. This paper highlights the extent to which the 4-H animal project experience affects children's ontologies. In doing so, this paper is an exemplar of the importance of collecting children's folklore.

Fairs and Community Identity

Folklorist Leslie Prosterman (1995) conducted a cultural analysis of the county fair, a commonly shared experience for many Americans growing up. She argues that the county fair reflects an aesthetic system created by the participants. Whether participants enter a competition with their hog, a quilt, or watermelon, the underlying criteria are similar in that balance and symmetry are desirable. Extreme qualities that deviate from an "ideal" do not hold sway. Calling the county fair a cultural icon, Prosterman argues, "the county fair represents a world they [community participants] would like to exist and highlights rules of conduct, sets of judgments, from which they know they deviate but which reinforce a sense of togetherness in a fractured and strife-ridden world" (1995, 12). In other words, the county fair represents community values, and these values recur in the presentation and judging of items. She further contends, "The fair constitutes a statement of what life could be—a kind of cultural icon" (12).

Local values are threaded throughout agricultural fairs, and these values develop in youth through the 4-H experience. How exactly does 4-H mediate youth experiences?

4-H and Children's Learning

4-H is an international youth development non-profit organization that started in the United States and operates under the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) within the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).¹ Its membership numbers 6.5 million American youth, and it has gone international as well. Clark County, Ohio, calls itself the birthplace of 4-H. In 1902 A.B. Graham, a school superintendent in Springfield Township, Ohio, established experimental agricultural clubs outside of school hours in urban schools in order to teach agricultural techniques. This pedagogical innovation instilled in the students a sense of pride in their rural heritage and filled a void in educating rural youth. Although 4-H is credited with originating in Ohio, the organization has multiple, independent beginnings (Wessel and Wessel 1982, 5). For example, Ransom Asa Moore initiated a precursor in 1891-1892 when he started "Young People's Contest Clubs" to exhibit their work at the Kewaunee County Fair in Wisconsin, concentrating on involving farm youth in the growing of improved seed varieties (Askins 2014). In addition, in Illinois in the early twentieth century, O.J. Kern and Will B. Otwell independently orchestrated precursors to the modern day 4-H concept by bringing new methods to farmers and targeting young people for corn growing contests, respectively (Wessel and Wessel 1982, 6). Early on, the potential of youths persuading parents to adopt new farm machinery was recognized. From the beginning of 4-H history, officials viewed youths as agents of change (Oden 2017, 158). Furthermore, modern 4-H is a mixture of each of these various precursors: Youths learn agricultural techniques and compete for premiums or winning placements in contests held at the local agricultural fair. The modern day 4-H concept is thus a combination of the pioneering work by Kern, Otwell, Graham, and Moore.

The symbol of the organization is a four-leaf green clover, each leaf imprinted with an H. The four H letters stand for "hands, heart, head, and health." The slogan of 4-H is "learn by doing" and its motto is "to make the best better." The best way to illuminate the role 4-H plays in the lives of young people is by reading the pledge:

I pledge my head to clearer thinking,

My heart to great loyalty,

My hands to larger service,

And my health for better living,

For my club, my community,

My country, and my world.

The pledge suggests a community aspect to 4-H. Indeed, the organization was part of the growth of American society and culture in the twentieth century (Wessel and Wessel 1982, xiii). A primary goal of 4-H is to empower young people as tomorrow's agricultural leaders. Each county within a given state has a 4-H extension office through the major land-grant university of that state. This unique method of administering traces its roots to the Morrill Act of 1862, which created the land grant college system dedicated to improvement in agriculture. Additionally, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 provided financial resources for the Extension Service (Wessel and Wessel 1982, 25). Within each county, there are a number of 4-H clubs members can join. When a child joins a club, they choose a 4-H project. A project is one of three types: direct activities, organized activities, and leadership/citizenship activities. Although most projects are individual, some are group-based.

Of all the 4-H projects, ones that involve raising an animal are the most popular (Sharp 2018). For most people, the mention of 4-H conjures an image of someone raising

a hog or lamb to show at the local fair. In 4-H animal projects, animals start as a baby in late winter or early spring and are raised throughout the spring and summer in time to show at the local agricultural fair. By the time of showing, the animal has grown considerably and enters competitively in the show ring. Exceptions to this rule are animal projects involving cattle. Because cattle take longer to reach their show size and weight, they show competitively in their second season. Judges evaluate animal projects on two main criteria: animal *conformation* and *showmanship*. Conformation refers to how well the animal adheres to breed- and species-specific standards (correct weight, muscle tone, etc.). Showmanship refers to how well the contestants oversee the animal in the show ring. Do they display confidence when interacting with their animals? Is the animal well-trained? Are they knowledgeable about the specific species with which they are working? Thus, agricultural fairs, among other functions, serve as a showcase for the season's 4-H projects.² Since the human-animal interaction plays a role in judging 4-H competitions' winners, these events lend themselves well to an ethnographic study asking children what meaning they can construct from their animal project experiences. I argue that the act of showing the animal in the ring is a polysemous act; spectators and 4-H participants construct different meanings of the showing performance. While spectators see youth parading animals around a ring, the participants know they are competing with each other, and through their challenging work, participants are learning, as I argue, skills needed to navigate life. The animal thus acts as a microcosm of life's uncertainties and challenges.

Experiential learning in 4-H competitions can serve as a model for child pedagogy. The U.S. National Research Council has advocated for a more experiential model of child science learning (National Research Council 2012, 26), and I argue that the 4-H animal project model has profound implications for how we teach science to our youth. The social basis of 4-H teaching, in which an advisor gives firsthand

demonstration to members, provides a concrete example of Russian psychologist Vygotsky's approach to child cognition. He theorized that social interaction dictates child learning (1978, 40). This approach materialized under educational philosopher John Dewey.³ Dewey proposed a model of self-actualization in learning, during which the individual changes over the course of the learning process. The Dewey approach rests on the importance of the learning environment. Thus, 4-H pedagogy supports the use of experiential learning advocated by Vygotsky and Dewey and serves a blueprint to child-based teaching. It is this socially-centered learning that has major implications for children's folklore, which I reveal in my ethnographic results.

Additionally, studies of child enculturation intersect with my interest in 4-H animal competitions. Cindy Dell Clark's study of youth perceptions of Halloween found that children often actively construct their own understanding of culture, thus challenging the prevailing notion that children simply are passive recipients of adult actions (2005, 183). Previous studies of what 4-H means to children employed surveys; no one thought to ask the participants themselves what the experience meant to them. This paper fills a major gap in literature by showing the value of conducting child-centered ethnography and consequently uncovering information not found in reductive survey studies.

Ethnographic Results

I conducted interviews as well as participant-observation for community fairs, county fairs, and associated events in both Pennsylvania (4) and Ohio (6) during 2020 and 2021, respectively. In total, I interviewed 36 children and 10 adults, including three judges. I also attended meetings, 4-H animal project showing events, a community banquet, or spent time around the animal barns at all of these fairs. I used pseudonyms to protect identify of members under 18. I collected consent from parents as well as

assent from the participants themselves under an approved IRB protocol from PSU to Stephen Locketto.

Observations allowed me to visualize what children learned from the 4-H animal project experience. Whether I saw an awards banquet, a meeting, an animal-showing competition, or behind-the-scenes behavior in the animal barns, 4-H participants exhibited a remarkable amount of agency. For example, the members effectively ran meetings and took the lead in taking care of their animals. By rule, only the participant can show the animal(s) in the ring. Previous 4-H studies could not capture this information by using surveys or other quantitative methods alone. The 4-H participants exhibited remarkable poise, confidence, and eye contact with others at these events. Of course, traces of these lessons were also captured in interviews. One such comment exemplifies how older members realize that the skills they gain translate into other contexts:

... but I think that 4H is great because like especially with the animal projects it's teaching them responsibility and how to like, work hard and do well with your project and follow through the whole way. (Allison, age 18)

4-H teaches you how to be your own person and step out into that, and really, you know, figure out who you are and then grow as a leader yourself there. (Lindsay, 4-H judge)

We want them to see that when they put time and energy into something, and work really hard, they can experience reward for their efforts. (Brian, 4-H parent)

Notice that in the second quote the child has to *figure out* who they are, an advanced cognitive skill; such a trait is not suggestive of merely duplicating adult instructions. Since 4-H is an experiential type of learning, in which the participant learns by doing, the potential for classroom pedagogy to mimic this model has implications for effective teaching, especially in science. Numerous interviewees attested to important skills and desired characteristics learned as a result of the 4-H experience such as confidence,

leadership, learning to make eye contact while performing, budgeting, listening, and learning how to collaborate. All of these skills represent vital attributes of effective adult behavior and are applicable to career-building skills that will serve 4-H participants throughout their lives. For example, any kind of project management requires coordinating multiple people and the dedication to see the project through its completion. Additionally, children must figure out how to cognitively master these skills as a result of experience. All of the interviewees expressed the desire to place in competitive events. Mastering these skills goes a long way in ensuring that someone wins their category for a given animal species during fair week. Thus, 4-H offers an experiential way of developing lifelong skills whereby children mimic adult behavior by actively doing, not passively duplicating what adults say or do.

Reading between the Lines

The most significant aspect I studied of the 4-H animal project experience was the analysis of the livestock judging performance. These shows are the culmination of the season-long effort to raise and train an animal. Youth participants have a few opportunities to show their animals up to this point. An event called the "Roundup" occurs in the summer so the kids can practice showing, but that is the only formal practice event. During the show, the kids have to walk their animals, and make them hold position by ensuring correct foot placement (for cattle) or by bracing the animal (holding it in place; for sheep and goats). Pigs just walk around because they will not stand still. The goal of Roundup, then, is to simulate an experience of being in the show ring with the animal in front of an audience.

The animals do not always cooperate with their handlers. Factors ranging from hot weather to time of day, to fatigue, can impact how an animal is behaving during an event, so the children overseeing them must learn how to adjust to what the animal is

doing in any given moment. If a child loses control, they must remain calm and use the skills they have practiced to regain control of the animal, and, in my observations, they are usually successful:

I do get...a little nervous before I go in, but once I'm in there it's pretty normal, it's like, it's like you've been training for this for months, so... (Stephanie, age 12)

So, I started um...I wasn't very good at it the first year. I missed round up and I felt really bad because my calf was like, 380 lbs. or 390 lbs. or whatever, and I could barely control him, and uh, Angela one of the other 4Hers, she's like maybe 80, 90 lbs. and her calf was like, almost 1000 lbs. *laugh* and she had no trouble controlling her animal, um and that's what kind of spurred me on to learn how to handle the animals better than I have in the past. (John, age 16)

Well, kind of. When you're outside the ring it's really nerve racking, but as soon as you step in, it's like really easy and fun. (Becky, age 11)

Children gained competency in the animal-showing event with age and experience. I observed many first-year participants who experienced difficulties managing their animals in the ring. But this observation became less common with the more experienced participants and virtually non-existent with the most seasoned veterans.

Every instance I witnessed of an animal not cooperating in the show ring had the same outcome: the child would repeatedly work with the animal to achieve the desired effect, thus mentally “outlasting” the animal. For many reasons, animals can prove uncooperative in the show ring, despite the fact that 4-H animal project participants spend a lot of time practicing with the animal ahead of the actual livestock judging shows. The weather could be hot, or the animal could be hungry or tired from already having showed. The same animals show in both conformation and showmanship events, so a hog that shows in middle class conformation could show again to compete for overall market hog champion and again for showmanship. Not all animals will behave according to plan. Goats can jump, pigs can squeal in protest when they are gently prodded, and sheep can refuse to walk with a handler. The 4-H participant keeps

working with the animal in a calm way. I never observed children use excessive force to regain control of an uncooperative animal. The trick is not to run after the animal, but to calmly walk after it, if it does walk away from its handler (Butler 2014, 109). Running after the animal is a sure way to lose points and not place highly, if at all.

In a businesslike manner, participants regained control of their animal when it was uncooperative in the show ring. The 4-H participant must learn, then, not to panic in such situations. The larger meaning of these circumstances is that members learn perseverance and confidence. They also see the value of arduous work because they start with a calf that is untamed, then see the results of their demanding work by the time of the fair:

I think my favorite part of working with an animal is the connection I build with the animal, um it's really to watch an animal just grow and progress and get bigger, my steer last year, when I first got him he was a little crazy and I was like "Oh no. This is gonna be a really bad year," but by the end he was actually the tamest steer I've ever shown, he was um, so nice and so perfect, it's kinda crazy to just watch them grow and watch the work you put in, um, really work out. I've loved watching all the time I invest and all the work I do, um, just pay off in the end. (Elizabeth, age 19)

Hmm, I dunno, just growing my operation is alot of fun. Um, when you get a calf tamed and you can actually work with it, like, walk it, that's alot of fun. Um, the hard part is getting it tamed *laugh* and getting it to walk with you. (John, age 16)

Thus, younger members' reactions reveal the immediate benefits of 4-H. As in my introduction, a scene I witnessed of a first-year member struggling to control his pig, resulted in him gaining control despite crying initially. The children learn mental fortitude, a trait which will suit them (or anyone) throughout life in seeing difficult projects through to their completion, despite obstacles:

... but I think that 4H is great because like especially with the animal projects it's teaching them responsibility and how to like, work hard and do well with your project and follow through the whole way. (Allison, age 18).

Participants thus learn not to give up despite difficulties. The mental fortitude learned as a result of enrolling in 4-H animal projects is a benefit can that only result from the co-production of meaning from both animal and child. If the animal never misbehaved, the child would never have learned such mental fortitude. Thus, the animal plays a part—albeit more of a tool in teaching a desired human characteristic, perseverance.

Conclusion

4-H animal projects are born, live a little while and die every year, just as the animals that help make the projects possible. Youth who participate in these projects learn lifelong skills, from the animal that they themselves must tame in order to form an effective team at the livestock judging events that occur at the fair. This yearly event is heavily steeped in tradition, as multiple family members and generations participate. What may seem like an innocuous project that involves raising a hog or calf is in fact something much more. These projects teach the participant crucial life-long skills as well as teaching them what it means to be a good human in Lancaster County. The animal serves as a tool in teaching values projected by humans onto this cultural event. These values include responsibility, compassion, homesteading, perseverance, artisanship, and confidence; there were too many responses to capture in this paper without overwhelming the main idea of children's folklore. The animal itself is not teaching these values, but it serves as a tool for helping participants learn the rules of society. The child learns agency, which is born at the end of the project when the animal dies. Thus, an endless loop of life and death recurs, whereby the animal dies to feed others and gives life in the form a child's newfound agency in a world run by adults. The annual 4-H animal project cycle is a cultural cicada.

This paper illustrates the importance of conducting child-centered ethnography. Previous study on the efficacy of 4-H animal projects employed surveys only; such quantitative tools are too reductive in capturing the rich and varied narratives that are amenable to an ethnography. By capturing the perspectives of the children themselves, I was able to reveal the importance of 4-H values for the child and the process of child enculturation. Such immersive learning processes as 4-H animal projects illustrate the power of experiential learning, a model articulated by Vygotsky and Dewey. The efficacy of the 4-H way serves as an exemplar in child pedagogy. Certain complexities, such as dealing with preconceptions that 4-H is for rural children only, will need to be considered. But in a time when science-teaching-methods are under scrutiny, the 4-H model could serve as a benchmark for classroom educators to emulate, especially in science-rich content areas.

Stephen Locketto is a second-year graduate student at Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies Ph.D. program after earning a MA there as well. He has a background in biology, specifically herpetology, and decided to return to school to take a biological humanities approach. He is interested in multispecies ethnography, cryptozoology, the role of pet keeping in children's education, and the social lives of animals. His dissertation will focus on the practice of herpetoculture (keeping reptiles and amphibians as pets) in American culture, especially as it applies to children.

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¹ For a more complete organizational description, see Butler (2014, 9-10).

² Another organization similar in intent and structure to 4-H is the National FFA Organization, formerly known as simply FFA (Future Farmers of America, <https://www.ffa.org>). The main difference is that FFA projects are part of a school class, whereas 4-H's activities take place outside of formal coursework (cf. <https://animalscience.psu.edu/outreach/youth>).

³ For specific commentary on pedagogy, see Dewey's *The Sources of a Science of Education* (1929). And for a discussion of the theoretical overlaps in Dewey's and Vygotsky's works, see Glassman (2001).