

VALIDATION OF THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF COMPETITIVE LIVESTOCK EXHIBITION BY TEXAS 4-H MEMBERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to validate the benefits gained through competitive livestock showing by Texas 4-H members. Participants of the study were 4-H members, 4-H parents, 4-H advisors, and show officials in their natural settings at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and stock shows leading up to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Methods used for the study were (1) in-depth interviews, (2) field observations, and (3) review of historical documents. Data analysis was performed using axial and selective coding. Six major themes related to the benefits of competitive livestock showing emerged. Those six themes were (1) social relations, (2) character, (3) family, (4) competition, (5) new cultures and environments, and (6) finance for education. It was concluded that participation in competitive livestock showing benefits Texas 4-Hers in developing life skills. Recommendations were that the Texas 4-H Program continue to utilize competitive livestock shows as a means of educating its youth members at the local, county, regional, and state level.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The Cooperative Extension Service 4-H Program is a youth organization which uses a series of rewards and incentives in the field of competition to educate its members. The 4-H mission is to help its youth members develop into useful and productive members of society. Weber and McCullers (1986) noted that the 4-H system of competition has proven to be highly effective for over 70 years. One of the 4-H program's biggest competitive endeavors is competitive livestock shows, and the program uses the Houston Livestock Show as one of its competitions to help satisfy this need.

The Houston Livestock and Rodeo has been around for over six decades. It was in 1931 that the Houston Fat Stock Show and Live Stock Exposition was founded, and it would not be for another thirty years that it would become known as the more familiar Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Today, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is one of the largest livestock shows in the world. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo's motto is "Benefiting Youth and Supporting Education." Today more than 14,000 4-H and FFA members from the ages of nine through nineteen compete annually in the junior show exhibitions. (Available Internet: <http://www.hlsr.com/gihistory.html>)

Over the past few years, however, competitions such as competitive livestock exhibitions have come under some criticisms. Weber and McCullers (1986) stated that literature increasingly shows that competition and rewards may have some surprising and unexpected hidden costs or side effects. They also claimed that although competition may be intended to motivate youth to stretch abilities and reach goals otherwise unattainable, they may also limit a child's creativity and interest.

This research study was designed to validate some of the perceived benefits of competitive livestock exhibition at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. The following report was qualitative in nature and showed benefits youth can gain through competition. The study was built on the qualitative triangulation method. First, a series of intensive interviews was conducted with 4-H parents and exhibitors. The other two methods were livestock show observations and review of historical documents. The primary livestock show observations were conducted at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo to observe Texas 4-H members competing in a natural environment.

The theoretical framework for data collection was rooted in symbolic interactionism. This focused the interest of the research toward understanding how individuals developed meaning in interaction with others (Marshall and Rossman, 1994). Blumer (1969) suggested that symbolic interactionism is based on the following central principles: (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them, (2) this attribution of meaning to objectives through symbols is a continuous process, and (3) meaning attribution is a product of social interaction in human society. Charon (1995) noted that symbols include words, objectives, and almost all acts with other people. Symbols are the basis for almost everything that characterizes the human being in nature. A necessary condition for the study of social interaction is careful attention to the overt behaviors and behavior settings of actors and their interactions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to validate the perceived benefits of competitive livestock showing by Texas 4-H members at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and other livestock exhibitions. As a means of accomplishing the purpose of this study, the following research questions were asked:

1. What type of benefits can be attributed to competitive livestock showing by Texas 4-H members at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo?
2. How are these benefits developed in the environment of and interactions with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and other livestock show competitions?

This study was conducted during fall and winter of the 1997-1998 livestock show season concluding with the Houston Livestock Show in early March.

Methods and Procedures

The research design for the study was qualitative in nature, which is common in behavioral and social sciences. Campbell and Martin (1992) noted to be effective and of service as agricultural and extension educators, qualitative research methods should be incorporated into research projects. The assumption of qualitative research is the researcher can best come to know the reality of a situation by being there and becoming immersed in the stream of events and activities (Hathaway, 1995).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1995), a bricoleur researcher is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks which allows for better perception of the subject at hand. In order to achieve various methods for interpretive research, this study used the triangulation method for collection of data. The data collection methods included (1) in-depth interviewing, (2) observations, and (3) a review of historical documents.

In-depth interviewing can be considered to be like a conversation with a purpose (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). This interviewing process is an informal process where the researcher explores a few general topics looking to uncover the participants meaning perspective. The researcher respects how the participant frames and structures his or her responses, which is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research. This process allowed for the participant's beliefs to not be influenced by the researcher. Interviews for this study took place prior to the 1998 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo at familiar settings for the participants such as their home or place of business. Informal conversations at livestock exhibitions were also used, but they were recorded as field observations.

The second process was observation and is a fundamental method in all qualitative inquiry. The researcher needs to witness the phenomenon at hand in order to analyze it (Adler and Adler, 1995). This procedure allowed the researcher to view 4-H exhibitors in a natural environment. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo along with several other settings were used to satisfy this need throughout the study. Observations were conducted from several settings such as animal stalls, holding pens, and inside and outside of the show ring. Observations were recorded as written text and/or videotaped and converted to field notes at a later time.

The final method was a review of historical records, which enabled comparison of what is happening in the 4-H livestock show program now to what happened in the past. Documents and articles about livestock shows in general along with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo specifically were reviewed. These texts were reviewed carefully for emergent themes that appeared often.

The participants who participated in the interview portion of the study were purposely selected. Qualitative research allowed for the selection of the project's participants. Those selected to be interviewed were considered to be experts in the subject as all had multiple years' experience in the area. Some of the people interviewed served dual roles. All of the past exhibitors had also gained experience volunteering with livestock exhibitors since they finished showing. Two past exhibitors had even volunteered for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and one now serves as an assistant County Extension Agent actively involved with 4-H exhibitors. The majority of parents interviewed showed livestock as a youth and part showed at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. All parents interviewed also volunteered with their local 4-H club. Observation participants were all observed at either the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo or the barrow sift which was held at Brenham, Texas.

This study was conducted during fall and winter of the 1997-1998 livestock show season concluding with the Houston Livestock Show in early March. This period of time included 4-H members purchasing, caring for, and exhibiting their livestock projects. Although several types of livestock could be shown the study was limited to exhibition of market swine, market sheep, market steers, and breeding heifers. These were the most numerous types of livestock exhibited by 4-H members at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. In order for perfection of field observations and exposure to the culture data were gathered during several area jackpot shows, local shows, county shows. These atmospheres provided a practical view of the 4-H show industry, and helped perfect the research for application prior to observations at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Livestock shows used for practice observations were all within the South Plains and Panhandle of Texas. In order to conduct observations at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo all appropriate facilities and establishments were observed. All places

exhibitors were allowed on the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo grounds were noted in field observations. Two other direct observation sites related to the Houston show were the barrow sift at Brenham, Texas and the whether sift at Rosenberg, Texas. Also, Houston hotels, motels, and restaurants were included for observations. All of these observation sites were related in the development of themes for the study. The interviews conducted for the research were primarily conducted at the willing participant's homes. Interviews conducted in the homes of exhibitors and their families allowed for the participants to be comfortable during the interview sessions. Also, visits to some of the places where current exhibitors kept their animals were allowed.

In qualitative studies data analysis occurs by data being broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. This process of analysis is called coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The goal of coding is to communicate a true and accurate report of the findings (Brink, 1991). Three methods of coding rooted in symbolic interactionism were used in the study. Open, axial, and selective coding were these methods and were used to analyze the interview transcripts, field observations, and historical documents. The coding of data by means of open, axial, and selective coding can be used to conduct thematic analysis (Benner, 1985). Breaking down, examining, conceptualizing, and categorizing data make up the process of open coding. After open coding data were put back together through axial coding by making connections between categories. Axial coding involves utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Finally, data were selectively coded by putting data into core categories and developing themes related to the study.

In order to supply a qualitative study with validity, control measures are built into the study. In this study multiple steps were taken in order to avoid interpretive biases. Proper control methods assure truthfulness of presented results. Triangulation was used in the research study. Triangulation involves the incorporation of multiple data collection methods in order to increase the confidence that may be placed in research findings (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This study used in-depth interviews, observations, and review of historical documents to establish three methods for triangulation. Data from the three methods was constantly compared to establish emergent themes and eliminate weak themes. The use of audio tape and videotape was used for credibility and avoidance of researcher biases. Audio tape was used for interviewing and reflective journal entries and it aided to give word by word accounts of what was being said or occurring. The reflective journal helped the researcher more closely evaluate personal biases. Videotape was also used for observation field notes. The final control method was to conduct the study during the same time frame of a similar study. The two researchers compared findings in order to help eliminate each other's personal biases.

Findings

After axial and selective coding of the notes six major themes related to the benefits of competitive livestock showing emerged. Those six themes were (1) social relations, (2) character, (3) family, (4) competition, (5) new cultures and environments, and (6) finance for education.

Development of Social Relations

The most prevalent theme to emerge from the study was development of social relations by 4-H livestock exhibitors. The development of social relations was believed to be a key life skill gained by exhibitors. Social relations were believed to be a main component of developing 4-H youth into productive and contributing members of society. Being able to meet and get along with people is something that applies to life everyday. Learning abilities related to social interactions at a young age can expediate the process of growth toward adulthood. Through livestock shows, exhibitors are not only given a chance to interact with people with a similar interest, but they have an opportunity to make social contacts for their futures. Participants were given the opportunity to establish relationships leading to college and possible future careers. Finally, social interactions that take place at livestock shows meet the innate human need for companionship and camaraderie. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee F: The interactions, the friends they made and we've made. Sure we'd take a grand champion every year, but and I think just part of it is that feeling when you win with a good animal. There's no way to describe the feeling its what keeps you going back also, but I have to say its the interactions with the people and the kids that's the most important.

Interviewee N: I think in regard to life skills, something that we receive, that a young person gets out of there would be number one, friends that one makes. New friends and old ones that you have met down there and you get reacquainted with plus the new friends that you meet every year that you go down there. Then through these friendships, you also have the ability to maybe make some connections down the road and, you know, it's just one of those things where a person grows through the number of friends and what you make of your friends. I think other than friendship, I think the ability to get along with people. But the winning and the ribbons and the placing is important, but I think the friendship and the ties that you have with it is probably the most meaningful to me.

Development of Character

The development of character was the second theme to emerge from the research study. This theme included several sub-categories such as the development of responsibility, work ethic, decision-making skills, sportsmanship, and exposure to the loss of something cared for such as an animal. Livestock shows are an effective event that can act as a guide to develop these traits in its participants. One of the most obvious developments occurs as responsibility. Livestock projects require time and dedication to be successful. Time is needed to feed, groom, and care for the animals shown. Exhibitors who commit to showing livestock are not just taking on an interest, they are taking on responsibility. Through the time and effort put in with caring for animals, livestock exhibitors can also develop qualities related to work ethic. Junior exhibitors get first hand experience with hard work and how it can bring many rewards. In caring for and showing animals exhibitors also have to make many decisions on their own which can enhance their decision making or thinking skills. Exhibitors are required to make decisions as minor as where to hold an animal or as complex as knowing the health status of the animal. Exhibitors can also acquire sportsmanship abilities in the livestock show ring. Livestock shows are unique in that it is one exhibitor versus many exhibitors. These competitors must be able to accept it when they do not win first and to be humble when they do. The final theme that related to character was exposure to loss of something cared for. The majority of livestock show projects are terminal in nature in that at the end of each livestock show season an exhibitor typically sells his or her animal through the show ring. Exposure to the loss of something cared for can give exhibitors first hand knowledge of loss and how to deal with it. Also, they can learn an important lesson regarding the value of life itself. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee O: I think it teaches a young person responsibility more than anything does. Because, there were many times that I wanted to go out and I wanted to go have a good time with my friends, especially when I got older. I wanted to go party with my high school friends, and I would have to stay home because I had a sow that was farrowing. You know, I had to walk my pig two miles because he was getting a little fat and I had to have him real lean for Houston. You know, when I wanted to sleep in the morning that would make me go out in below freezing weather and chip ice out of the water. It teaches a young person responsibility more than anything does.

Interviewee F: Discipline, sportsmanship, work, to get there by working with their animals, I imagine its pretty lonely out there showing an animal, where you are all by yourself and have complete control I think that's a feather in their hat.

Family

The third theme that emerged was the development of strong family relations by Texas 4-H members who show livestock. Livestock shows are unique in that they are one of the few youth activities that involve the whole family with every aspect of the program. One rarity is how children of various ages are all able to get involved in this program. Livestock shows can bring families together in numerous ways. Parents can help their children immensely with livestock projects. This help can include monetary aid, help with grooming at a show, or just them feeding for their child while he or she is at another school function. Help to their children can be as simple as giving a ride to a younger exhibitor so he or she can go care for his or her project. Through livestock shows, families travel as a family unit that is working toward a common goal and experiencing new and foreign environments as a family. Finally, livestock shows bring in emotions of the entire family. In livestock shows it is unique in how a parent can truly help his or her child. This is one of the few activities where parents can do more than just watch their child participate. Parents are given the opportunity to be a teacher, model, and example for their child to observe and try to develop the same positive traits. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee J: I know that I would not have been successful in the livestock shows if it wasn't for my family, and I don't recommend anyone to try to do it by themselves. I don't think they can do it. I think that even the kids and the young adults that show through FFA chapters, I still think have to have involvement from their family in order to be successful. If anything, it brought us closer together. When we won, we cried together, and when we lost, we cried together. I mean, it was, my parents were extremely supportive and luckily, I grew up in a home that was able to support my dreams and things I wanted to do financially, and that made a big difference as far as my success in the show ring. And there are a lot of young adults that haven't had that opportunity, but they still had the opportunity to go there and experience what it is about, win or lose.

Interviewee B: You can't say that being in the wash rack was the enjoyable part, but in a way it was because it was a teamwork effort. Those years, I remember more than any vacations actually. Because we were working towards a common goal. You know, on a vacation, it's just sort of to have fun. And ours was to have fun, but we had that common goal to compete and it didn't matter if we won or lost. We gained something from going. And that was something that we shared as a family. That's the whole thing. I never would have thought of not going and supporting the kids.

Interviewee F: The fondest memories, I guess are the family getting together and doing that as a family thing as opposed to some other athletic or school events where its usually one child just involved the whole

families involved, we like the comradeship with all the people that go with us. and the good times we have with all the other people and their families.

Competition

Exposure to competition was the fourth theme to emerge from coding of data. Competition in livestock exhibitions is believed to be something desired by those who are involved. Livestock competitions are unique in that there can be different levels of success. A majority of youth competitive activities are designed where you only have a first place and everyone else is a non-winner. In livestock shows you have a first and a last, but you can have numerous participants placed in between. Many participants can see winning in this competition in many ways. While every exhibitor desires to win first just making a premium auction may be satisfactory. At major livestock shows exhibitors can place many places away from first place and still feel successful. Competition in livestock shows is also seen as a positive as any one can compete from the ages of nine to nineteen. In livestock shows a child does not have to be the fastest, the strongest, or the most talented. Every child can show an animal effectively. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee J: Well, I'm sure that many people have many different ideas about whether competition is friend or foe. I personally consider it is friend. I think that in everything that you do in life you compete and there is always a winner and always a loser. There is always someone on top and someone on bottom. I think not only in, I mean, just comparing livestock shows to other activities, one thing that I think really hits home as far as the competition factor is that there is money involved. There is at stake and something on the line. And that makes it even that much more important to be successful. I think that, as far as the competition factor in my experience, that it was something that was always extremely important to me and I tried not to see it as, you know, a win or lose. It was just do the best that I can and kind of go with that and see what happens.

Interviewee O: Competition. I guess it makes you deal with life because competition is out there in anything that you do whether you are competing for a job or competing for a girlfriend, you know, you're competing for anything. I think competition is always out there and it has to, it gets you used to it. It makes you be able to handle pressure, I guess is another thing. It doesn't make you get all mad at a friend, because, like I said, that friend, I showed against friends and there were many times that we were showing and I was either in first hole or maybe fifteenth hole and he was in fourteenth or placed below me or placed above me. And, you know, I had to be able to compete against him real hard in that show arena and try to beat him, but then afterwards, I had to be able to become his friend again.

Interviewee C: I think competition is important because if you are not out competing, if you're not trying your best or if you don't want to succeed, there's no need to be doing something. I mean, even though stock shows are fun and a big part of the importance of stock shows are to meet the people and to reach all those values that you get from stock shows, but it is also important to be competitive. Competitive, that is a value I think, that you gain from stock shows and that you keep all your life. I think everybody wants to win, but at the same time, being competitive also teaches you to be a good loser. If you do not win, I think it is important that you take your loss gracefully and be happy for whoever did win. You know, that's another value that it teaches you. As long as you are competitive, you want to win and you strive harder and you try to reach your goals and achieve your goals, and I think that relates back to anything in life. If you are competitive, you want to be the best that you can in anything and you'll try that much harder for whatever you're doing, and I think that you can kind of pick up that from stock shows and learn how to deal with it and how to handle both winning and losing. You've got to be a good loser, but you've got to be a good winner too. You know, you don't want to win and then go rub it in everybody's face. You want to be humble with your winning and also be gracious with your losses.

New Cultures and Environments

The fifth theme to emerge was exposure to new cultures and environments. Livestock shows are truly special in that they can educate those involved about how not every thing is the same as it is in their hometown. Many exhibitors would have never experienced differences in the world if not for competing in livestock shows. Through seeing and meeting new cultures and being thrown into new environments exhibitors can gain new knowledge and grow as individuals. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee C: Being from a small town and never going to a big city, being a big city for you, once you go to Houston, you never forget the size of it, you know, the malls and eating and places like that. Just how huge it was, you know, especially for a young kid. You know, it is hard to remember, but I'm sure it is just amazing to see the size, the big city and the big buildings. And I always remember Houston being the largest stock show in the world, and it was always important when you were younger to keep up with your parents or somebody because it was so easy to get lost in the Astrohall. So that will always be a big memory too was the size of the town.

Interviewee A: Then I guess exposure to people from different parts of the state and different cultures. They just need to, they're exposed to people that they don't normally have to be exposed to. And they can see some different things and meet some different people. I remember some kids it would be the first time they'd eaten in a restaurant. And some, eating breakfast in a restaurant, they didn't even know how to order a scrambled egg. I remember a kid one time he was eating at one of those seafood places and they had horseradish on the table. He asked one of the other kids "what is that" and they said "oh, it's some kind of salad dressing" and he took a big old spoonful of it and put it in his mouth. His old eyes went to watering. I thought they'd killed the kid. You know, it just, it was just a phenomenon to them. No, kids are more well-traveled now and they've, either they've traveled by miles or they travel through the TV and it, they probably aren't as easily impressed as those kids were back in the 70s and early 80s. But, it was country coming to town, I guarantee you.

Interviewee E: I remember meeting a lot of neat people. I remember a housekeeper named Opal at the hotel we always stayed at. She was there for like five or six years in a row. She liked us because she had never been around Ag. type people from a small town before. Of course, we thought she was neat because we had never been around many people from a big city.

Finance for Education

The final theme that emerged after selective coding was financing for education for exhibitors. While livestock shows are no way to get rich, they can provide money for a child's future education. As some studies have indicated a majority of livestock exhibitors do use their winnings for education. This financial ability can only help participants as they try and continue their education after high school. Through education an individual can become more open-minded and grow as a person to become a contributing member of society. The following are quotes from participants that support the theme:

Interviewee C: Just important things that help me want to be the best that I could and it opened a lot of doors for me. It opened doors at college and it also opened doors here at University, as far as people, administration and people like that. If it wouldn't have been for stock shows, they probably would never have heard of me and I probably would never have heard of them. It just kind of opened those doors to where I could get in touch with them and allow them to help me as far as getting my education is concerned. You know and scholarships and things of those matters. And also, doing good at stock shows, all that money allows you to save that money and be able to afford to go to college.

Interviewee G: It's not monetary for us but yet we've helped the kids and had them put there checks in there savings account and that is how the girls have paid there way to college also, so it's a way of saving over the years, our daughter went 4 years of college on her earnings.

Interviewee L: I do think that they put a lot of money back into the education for the Ag kids, and I think that's great.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations based on the conclusions of the study:

The Texas 4-H Program should continue to utilize competitive livestock shows as a means of educating its youth members. Although this study has validated, through qualitative measures, the benefits of competitive livestock exhibition for this group, additional studies need to be replicated with a larger population.

Competitive livestock exhibitions should continue to be offered at the local, county, regional, and state level for Texas 4-H and FFA members. Each level of livestock shows offers educational opportunities for participants and their families.

As there have been many benefits of livestock shows validated in this study, the Texas 4-H program should publicize and promote these livestock projects through educational journals, newspaper articles, and through additional research as educational for 4-H members and their families. 4-H leaders and livestock show officials should consider publicizing the perceived benefits of competitive livestock shows. These benefits should be listed in the following recommended order: (1) social relations, (2) character, (3) family, (4) exposure to competition, (5) exposure to cultures, and (6) finance for education.

As livestock shows have been proven as educational for 4-H participants, more 4-H leader training should be conducted related to competitive livestock shows.

Due to the homogeneous make-up of the majority of families involved in the livestock show program, the Texas 4-H program should do more to encourage more diverse families involvement. More diverse families would include more single parent families, more minority families, and more urban families.

More monetary advancement opportunities should be established specifically for livestock exhibitors. Participants of this study indicated use of their monetary gains for furthered education.

In order to support the emergent themes of this study, similar qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted. Suggested topics are: (a) a factor analysis of the perceived benefits identified by various groups to determine if the same themes emerge as quantitative factors, (b) a study to determine how individuals perceive how these particular benefits of livestock shows effect academic and/or career success, (c) a study on the demographics of the participants at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and how they relate to academic and/or career success compared to non-exhibitors, and (d) a study which examines the effects and benefits gained from participating as volunteers at livestock exhibitions such as the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

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