A Farmer's Life According to Their Sheep

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This Easter – after months of the university way of life – I was keen to return to my home village and throw myself into lambing. Although my family recently moved away from my 'home village' (it now takes three buses and about three hours to get back) I still feel strongly attached to the area and the people, and returning to spend my –is it eighth? – Easter holiday lambing with local farmer and friend April Potts had been my plan for months.

What did it mean, I wanted to know, to be a farmer of sheep? And how is such a person's life shaped around this countryside role? Through chatting "on the job", over meals, and by the fire, April and the farmers she regularly interacts with not only helped me to find answers to these questions but also made me realise that I lived out these answers every Easter holiday. I grew to realise that I was already a member of the community I wished to study; and the answers my fellow members gave rang true with my own experiences. In anthropology, one strives to know another's culture whilst accepting that one's own will always influence the final understanding. I am confident in the insights into the sheep farming community that follow because I am privileged enough to share the culture which I am trying to describe.

My ethnography will focus on four main areas of life that are clearly shaped, if not determined, by being a farmer of sheep. I present the four areas – space, time, relationships and mind-set - in the order in which they occurred to me because I feel this mimics my progression into a deeper understanding of what it means to be a sheep farmer.

SPACE:

The lambing season is a very chaotic time and farmers often need to juggle many jobs at once in the lambing shed, the organisation of this space should therefore – one would assume – be such that it aids the ability of the farmer to work effectively. April's lambing shed consists of three large communal pens into which ewes having singles, twins

and triplets are divided, with the twins' pen being the size of the singles' and triplets' pens combined; individual pens are given to a ewe once she has lambed and they frame the communal pens to form corridors (see Notes). I had never questioned that this was an entirely logical and practical decision as the divided communal pens made assessing a labour situation (how many lambs to expect etc.) and deciding on the best course of action quick and generally easy. Upon questioning April about it however I found that the lambing shed was not primarily designed with her convenience and practicality in mind.

It was in fact primarily designed with the sheep in mind; to use April's words, because sheep are 'flock animals' they naturally want to 'be with their friends' until they have their lambs, at which point they want to have their own 'private space'. The lambing shed was therefore designed around these two, contradictory desires of ewes in their final days of pregnancy and the first few days as a new family unit.

The Grants, who have a sheep farm just up the road from April's, have significantly more sheep with a correspondingly larger area for lambing. Whilst this makes the task of monitoring far more difficult the additional space shows an extension of the same approach to organisation. The extra space, Liz Grant explained, was used to create intermediary pens for four ewes and their lambs because this makes the transition from the privacy of a family pen to the communal living of the fields less abrupt and therefore less confusing for the new families. Despite the greater need for a design which is efficient and practical for the Grant family, the bigger farm was organised in this sheep-centred way every year.

To be a sheep farmer, therefore, means sacrificing some of your own best interests in order to promote those of your sheep. Organising the lambing shed in a way which makes your life more difficult simply to promote the well-being of the sheep may seem like going above and beyond the call of duty, especially considering that lambing is hectic and tiring at the best of times. To the sheep farmers, however, it is the instinctual thing to do: the sheep come first, and space is arranged with this in mind. This automatic and altruistic attitude is reminiscent of a parental attitude. I do not mean to say that the farmers think of their sheep as kin, I was never led to believe this by any of the farmers I spoke to; but there certainly are elements of a farmer's behaviour which mimic those of a parent, and being willing to

dedicate extra time and hassle to provide comfortable surroundings for the sheep is just one such example.

TIME:

During the lambing season many often time consuming tasks need to be frequently carried out. Firstly, orphaned lambs (a term which is used to mean lambs which could not be adequately fed by their mothers, as well as the few who are actually orphaned) generally need to be bottle fed every four hours, and depending on how many orphaned lambs you have at any one time, this can be extremely time consuming. Secondly, all the sheep in all the pens need to be fed twice a day with pellets, and those in the individual pens – because they are away from the communal troughs – also need a constant supply of water and silage (a grass crop feed) brought to them. Furthermore, the communal pens need to be checked every half an hour or so to ensure that help is quickly on hand should ever a labouring sheep need it. And finally, beyond the confines of the lambing shed, the sheep and lambs which have been moved into the fields also need to be regularly checked to make sure that no lambs have wandered off or are weakening.

Needless to say this leaves little time for the farmer to invest in other activities. April, for example, mentioned that she would be unable to go to a Newcastle football match the following week, and although she is an avid supporter of the team she accepted this without any hint of disgruntlement. Whilst really she *could* have gone, she never questioned that fact that she would not; it would never occur to her to leave the farm and her sheep unattended during lambing time, and certainly not for a personal jaunt. I realised therefore that it is less a case of lambing *taking up* so much of a farmer's time, and more about a farmer being inherently compelled to *dedicate* all their time to the well-being of the sheep. The readiness to give so much time over to ensuring the health of the sheep becomes, as John Gray remarks (1999: 449), a source of personal identity: to be April, and to be a sheep farmer, means devoting your time to your sheep. It is not a case of April creating her identity as a sheep farmer through actively and consciously putting the sheep first however;

again - in a way very reminiscent of a parental role—April gains her status as a sheep farmer precisely because this sacrifice is made automatically and unconsciously.

RELATIONSHIPS:

Relationships in the farming community have specific, unspoken rules, one of which – as April and the Grants show through their organisation of space and time—is that a true sheep farmer puts the well-being of the sheep above his or her own convenience. Another unspoken rule is that help should be given to other members of the farming community as and when they need it, even if this makes one's life more complicated.

Ideally, farming is a family activity, and outside help should not often be necessary. In farming families it is possible to break down the complex task of lambing into specific roles and responsibilities which can be distributed among the family according to age, ability, and arguably gender. Ray Abrahams argues that livestock farming is well suited to families because the farm is 'mobile' and 'easily divisible', making it easily adaptable to the 'fissive tendencies' of families (1991: 72). All my experiences of a farming community however tell me that whilst it is very common for a family to regroup each lambing season to ensure that the family farm continues to prosper (as is the case with the Grants and their grown up daughters), it is almost unheard of for family members to want to split up the family farm. I would instead argue that sheep farming works well as a family run enterprise because the working unit is tied together more strongly, and all members are more heavily invested in ensuring the farm flourishes, unlike in an employer/employee relationship.

The return of grown up children to the family farm shows an instinctual desire to be grouped together at a difficult time that is mirrored by the organisation of the lambing shed. The communal pens show the similar desires of the family and the sheep to be grouped together with those they know, and the individual pens for a ewe and her new lambs show the shared valuing of family life. The organisation of the lambing shed, and the willingness to dedicate great amounts of time to the sheep, could therefore be seen as the farmer extending the same benefits of his/her approach to family life towards the sheep.

At times, as is the case with April, grown up children are unable to return to assist during the lambing season and when this is the case the farming community willingly steps in to fill the role of absent family members. Bill Taylor is a perfect example of this. Ever since April's partner Pete died, Bill has come for an hour each morning and afternoon during lambing to take over the responsibility of feeding, watering and monitoring the sheep so that April has time for a meal and a dog walk. Although now retired from his fencing business—which was the reason he decided to lamb early in the first place, as farmers often realise during this time that their fencing needs upgrading before young livestock can be safely put into the fields – he continues to lamb much earlier than his fellow sheep farmers so he can help them out during the normal Easter lambing period. He therefore chooses to make his life more difficult so that he can make it easier for farmers like April; this kind of sacrifice shows that the farming community works rather like a family would. That this sacrifice of time and convenience is also seen in a farmer's approach to their sheep reinforces the notion that family bonds are, in a slight way, extended to the sheep and not just to other farmers.

Offers of help like Bill's are not uncommon in communities that are built around a shared life activity because cooperation is often the key to success. Unlike in some other communities, where help is given only on demand and is expected to be repaid in the same manner (Mewett in *Belonging* 1982: 112) the sheep farming community has always seemed very generous when it comes to helping other community members, and very unlikely to see future repayments of help as a right. Help is often offered before it is necessary for someone to demand it (as April found during the first year after her partner Pete—who played a massive role in the running of the farm—passed away) and is repaid in many ways, again before any demand is necessary.

Like many outdoor ways of life, sheep farming is definitely a 'collective enterprise' (Palsson 1994: 902) which relies on cooperation and mutual offerings of assistance for success. That the sheep farming approaches this need more like a family than a community united through a common business seems fitting because the strong bonds and

commitment to a common cause—that are often defining features of a family—are necessary when it comes to something as demanding and difficult as lambing.

As with families, the sheep farming community also has the unspoken rule that members should not compete with one another as if they were rivals, especially not during lambing time and particularly not about important and sensitive matters like money or yield. April stressed that, even as a female farmer trying to prove her ability and competence, she did not see her relationships with other farmers as competitive but instead saw them as being 'more complimentary' in nature. The farming community draws in people of all different talents, she told me, and these many different talents (fixing tractors, fencing, new techniques for lambing difficult ewes etc.) are all needed if one is to succeed as a sheep farmer. Because everyone in the community will have relied on other members for manpower, machinery or some other form of help at some point the community cannot afford to be split with petty feuds and competition.

The only time, April told me, that things get 'quite competitive' is when events such as sheepdog trials and sheep shows take place. Such occasions are examples of the few times a year that large gatherings of farmers take place, and the out of the ordinary occurrence is paired with out of the ordinary social rules. These events offer the farmers a space to deal with any social tensions they may have, or simply to let off steam, whilst secure in the knowledge that it is only for a limited amount of time and that soon the social relations will return to their symbiotic family/community nature. Like with the Balinese cockfights as Geertz describes them, sheepdog trials and sheep shows give the farmers an opportunity to play out hierarchical status and personal identities through an animal form (1973: 8), although it must be said that the sheepdog trials are far more jovial in tone than the cockfights! Although the farmers depend on the normal rules for social relations, and in all honesty probably prefer them too, that way of life is strengthened and refreshed by these mini episodes of rule reversal. It is therefore possible to argue that even when farmers break the normal rules of being a community without competition, the aim and the result of this rule breaking is to strengthen the community values of cooperation.

All of these natural, unspoken rules about cooperation and not competing against one another enable farmers like April—who would otherwise have greatly struggled—to continue to put the well-being of the sheep above their own best interests. There is therefore a double layering of sacrifices: firstly of sacrificing some of your own comfort for that of your sheep, and secondly of making sacrifices to ensure others can continue to make such sacrifices for their sheep. The whole community is therefore geared to promote the well-being of the sheep.

MIND-SET:

Being a sheep farmer is a very practical job in that it is very physically demanding; it therefore requires farmers to have a very practical outlook to match. There are days during lambing where everything seems to go wrong, or at least not to plan, and during my last day on the farm, Bill and I were complaining about how it is almost guaranteed that the most lambs will be born when you are the busiest, or the most tired, or when the weather is the most miserable. At times like this, when there is so much going on, you need a mind-set that will help you to cope. April talked a lot about how being a sheep farmer means that you can't be 'too much of a perfectionist', that sometimes the best you can aim for is a 'jolly acceptance of a second rate performance', and this is something I could really relate to from my own experiences.

One of the best things I learnt from my times doing lambing is that sometimes you have to accept that you *cannot* do everything as perfectly as you would like to because there just isn't time. On occasions you have to accept that the best you *can* do—and the most you can expect of yourself—is to achieve something vaguely resembling order. At times, *good enough* is good enough. Knowing when to accept your limits and understanding that the best you can do is *all* you can do is a life approach that April really values and one that she told me she had always been keen to instil in her children, as her parents had in her.

This mind-set is one that supports farmers during lambing because it enables them to graciously continue to deal with the trying situations which placing a sheep's best

interests above their own can naturally present, by supplying them with a positive but realistic outlook on what they can expect of themselves. This is a mind-set that is evocative of a parent's outlook, though here I can speak only for the attitude of my parents and of April's own parenting approach; it is also one which my brother and sisters, and April's children were encouraged to have, furthering the element of family life which can be found in a farmer's interaction with their sheep.

CONCLUSION:

I hope I have been able to give an insight as to just how extensively being a sheep farmer shapes your life. Your surroundings, routine, relationships and outlook on life are all tied in with, and affected by, the life choice to be a farmer of sheep. Sheep farming is certainly a life choice, a way of life, and I have never heard it referred to as being a job or a career (and, notably, the same could also be said of parenting). When I asked April why she chose to spend her life farming her first response was that it was 'not to make loads of money, because it doesn't.' If the decision to become a farmer isn't because of the money, and it certainly isn't because it makes for an easy life, then what is the motivation?

For April and Liz Grant, it seems the motivation is their love for the countryside. This is a theme which anthropologist John Gray also focused on in his work with farmers in the Scottish borderlands—just an hour or so north by car. He speaks of the farmers as having a 'feeling of being in their proper place' (1999: 441) when it comes to their surroundings, and this is something my own fieldwork corroborates. April, for example, told me that she 'couldn't imagine' settling down to anything that 'wasn't integral' to the place she lived in: she can't imagine a way of life that does not include a sense of belonging with the land, and in a way the sheep mediate and strengthen this attachment to the land.

I would argue, however, that for the farmers I spoke to it wasn't simply a matter of feeling "at home in the hills" (1999: 441) that made them happy to take over their family farms. Liz Grant spoke fervently about how she thought Northumberland was 'the most gorgeous place to live' and she told me that she constantly reminded herself never to take it

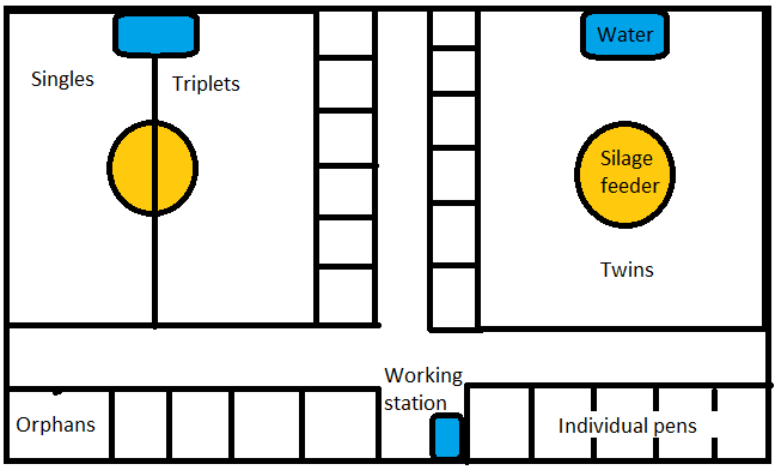
for granted but to realise every day that all the hard work was worth it to be in such a beautiful area. For Liz, the opportunity to work on her farm was at once both humbling and greatly appreciated, not only because she felt a natural tie to the land but because she was wholly in awe of its beauty, and wholeheartedly in love with it. This great love for the land would explain why sheep farming, and the entire way of life that comes with it, is something which farmers willingly commit their all to.

April especially spoke of her reluctance to ever stop farming. Now in her late sixties at least, April told me that people are continually bemused as to why she is still running a farm when she doesn't need the money or the hassle (she has become rather well known in the fashion world because her land has become the favourite destination of Tim Walker—a now quite famous photographer—for fashion shoots). For April however there is nothing confusing about it and she is determined to simply reduce the number of sheep she has (now at 130, when once there were 500) rather than stop entirely. Clearly, for April, being a sheep farmer is not just a job but is instead a very intrinsic part of her life and identity: as long as she is living she will be an active sheep farmer. To be April is to be a farmer of sheep; the two are not simply inseparable but are one and the same thing, and to understand April is to understand that this will always be the case.

Being a sheep farmer is something you do and something you are. Whether you organise your space, time, social relationships and mind-set around the good of the sheep because you are a sheep farmer, or whether you become a sheep farmer through doing this is unclear and beside the point. The point is that this interwoven and cyclic relationship establishes itself quite naturally within sheep farmers, and it is something which makes them deeply happy. Finding lifelong happiness through improving as far as possible the happiness of your flock, whilst being surrounded by an area and a community which you feel strongly bonded to may seem like an overly naïve and idealistic conclusion; but then I have been a part of this way of life for nearly a decade now and to me it doesn't seem in any way untrue. I would therefore argue that the primary motivation behind adopting the sheep farming way of life – at least for me; though I am confident it holds for all the farmers I spoke to – is simply a desire to be happy. And really, isn't that all any of us want?

Reading this back, it shocks me to discover how plainly the sentiments voiced in the previous paragraph could so easily be referring to parenting if one swaps the words ‘sheep’ and ‘sheep farmer’ for ‘children’ and ‘parents’. The way that the countryside and the role of a sheep farmer within one’s community inspires such feelings of enchanted wonderment and lasting happiness, which are the main driving forces behind all the commitments and sacrifices, are incredibly akin to those of familial, and particularly parental love.

NOTES:



Above is a rough design of what April’s lambing shed is like. At the working station, as well as a small water trough which we use to get water for the individual pens, there will be a selection of anything we may need. This will include: feeding bottles and tubes, plastic gloves, rubbish bags, knives, string, medicines, rubber bands for balling and tailing, paper and pencils, plastic macs for lambs and aerosol sprays of various different colours for numbering the sheep and lambs before they go into the fields.

Meet the farmers:

Left to right:
Bill Taylor
April (with Meg),
and Chris

Liz Grant

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